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**GRAND RAPIDS ART MUSEUM WELCOMES ACTOR KYLE JOHNSON FOR THE
AUGUST 22 SPECIAL EVENT "A TRIBUTE TO GORDON PARKS"**

Star of Parks' Autobiographical Film "The Learning Tree" to Speak at 7:00 pm

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich., August 18, 2008 – The Grand Rapids Art Museum (GRAM), in conjunction with the current exhibition *America Black and White: Gordon Parks Photography*, presents a special night dedicated to the diverse work and influence of Gordon Parks. Special guest speaker for the event is Kyle Johnson. Mr. Johnson starred as Newt Winger, the fictionalized alter ego of young Gordon Parks in the classic 1969 autobiographical film *The Learning Tree*. He will talk about meeting Gordon Parks, which happened after a series of events that started with being "discovered" while tagging along to a rehearsal with his mother Nichelle Nichols (the actress who played Lt. Uhura in the original *Star Trek* series). Mr. Johnson will also speak in regard to the screen tests for the role, filming on location in Kansas, and the inclusion of *The Learning Tree* in the Smithsonian collection. In tribute to Parks and the great figures of our time that were the subject of Parks' brilliant photography, Mr. Johnson will close the lecture with a reading of key works by Langston Hughes, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gordon Parks.

The evening, in the familiar Friday Nights at GRAM style, will begin and end with live music. The Ed Clifford Group performs the original compositions of Gordon Parks as well as music by the great Duke Ellington, also the subject of Parks' photography.

A special showing of the film *The Learning Tree*, is scheduled for 2:30pm Saturday, August 23, in the Cook Auditorium at the Art Museum.

Organized by the Grand Rapids Art Museum in cooperation with the Gordon Parks Foundation, the exhibition *America Black and White: Gordon Parks Photography* consists of thirty-five photographs, including rare vintage prints recently acquired by the museum. The exhibition is on view until September 28, 2008.

Admission to Friday Nights at GRAM, which includes the musical tribute and the speaking engagement, is \$5 for non-members from 5:00 to 9:00 pm. Galleries are open all evening and a cash bar and dinner buffet are available.

The schedule for Friday, August 22 is as follows:

- 5:15 to 7:00 pm: MUSIC: Ed Clifford's Gordon Parks Tribute Group plays in the Wege Pavilion
- 7:00 to 7:45 pm: ART FORUM: Kyle Johnson: A Tribute to Gordon Parks-Film, Poetry & Prose
- 7:45 to 8:30 pm: MUSIC ENCORE: Ed Clifford's Tribute Group resumes.

Visit the website at www.gramonline.org for an extensive list of related programming.

About Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks (1912–2006) was the first African-American photographer to gain an international reputation in the twentieth century. Prior to his recognition after World War II, African-American photographers were restricted to studio portraiture in black communities. The most famous example was James Van der Zee, who was active in New York during the 1920s and 1930s and a notable figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Parks' distinguished work for *Life* magazine was a pivotal influence on a new generation of black photographers who recorded the events of the Civil Rights Movement.

Parks was born the youngest of fifteen children in the small prairie town of Fort Scott, Kansas. When his mother died in 1927, he was sent to live with his sister in St. Paul, Minnesota, where his brother-in-law turned him out when he was still a teenager. Homeless on the winter streets of Minnesota, he survived through jobs as a dishwasher, busboy, and piano player barely managing to earn a living. He eventually got a steady job with the railroad as a dining car waiter.

During one of his runs on the transcontinental train from Chicago to Seattle he picked up a magazine left by a passenger. It featured images from the Farm Security Administration of the desperate rural poverty of the Great Depression by photographers Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, and John Collier. Seeking to find his own voice, Parks purchased a camera for \$7.50 in 1938.

The first photographs he shot revealed a significant talent. He quickly sought opportunities to work as photographer and ways to make a living in the profession. In 1940, laid off his job, hungry and desperate, he walked into a stylish dress shop in St. Paul and told the owners he wanted to do fashion photography. They gave him a chance and displayed the photographs he took in the store window. They caught eye of Marva Louis, wife of the champion boxer, Joe Louis. She invited Parks to work in Chicago and there he won a Julian Rosenwald Fellowship and a job with the Farm Security Administration in Washington, D.C.

In 1944 Parks rented a room at Harlem's YMCA and began looking for work in New York. He took his fashion photographs to *Harper's Bazaar*. They were impressed but explained that as a Hearst organization, they were restricted from hiring "Negroes." Parks went to his friend Roy Stryker from FSA who sent him to Edward Steichen. Steichen scribbled down a name and gave it to Parks. "Go see this man at *Vogue!*" That afternoon *Vogue* magazine hired Gordon Parks. During the next four years, he traveled to the world's fashion capitals on assignment for the magazine while continuing to work independently on other subjects that also interested him.

In 1948 he was hired by *Life* magazine and produced a significant body of photographic work. In addition to photography, Parks also wrote books, composed music, and pursued filmmaking. Gordon Parks died in 2006.

About the Grand Rapids Art Museum

The mission of the Grand Rapids Art Museum (GRAM) is to provide a gathering place where people of all ages and backgrounds can enrich their lives through interaction with works of art in a thought-provoking and creative way. Established in the heart of downtown Grand Rapids, the new art museum is internationally known for its distinguished design and LEED Gold certified status. Established in 1910 as the Grand Rapids Art Association, GRAM has grown to include more than 5,000 works of art, including American and European 19th and 20th century painting and sculpture and over 3,000 works on paper. Embracing the city's legacy as a leading center of design and manufacturing, GRAM has a growing collection in the area of design and modern craft.

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