

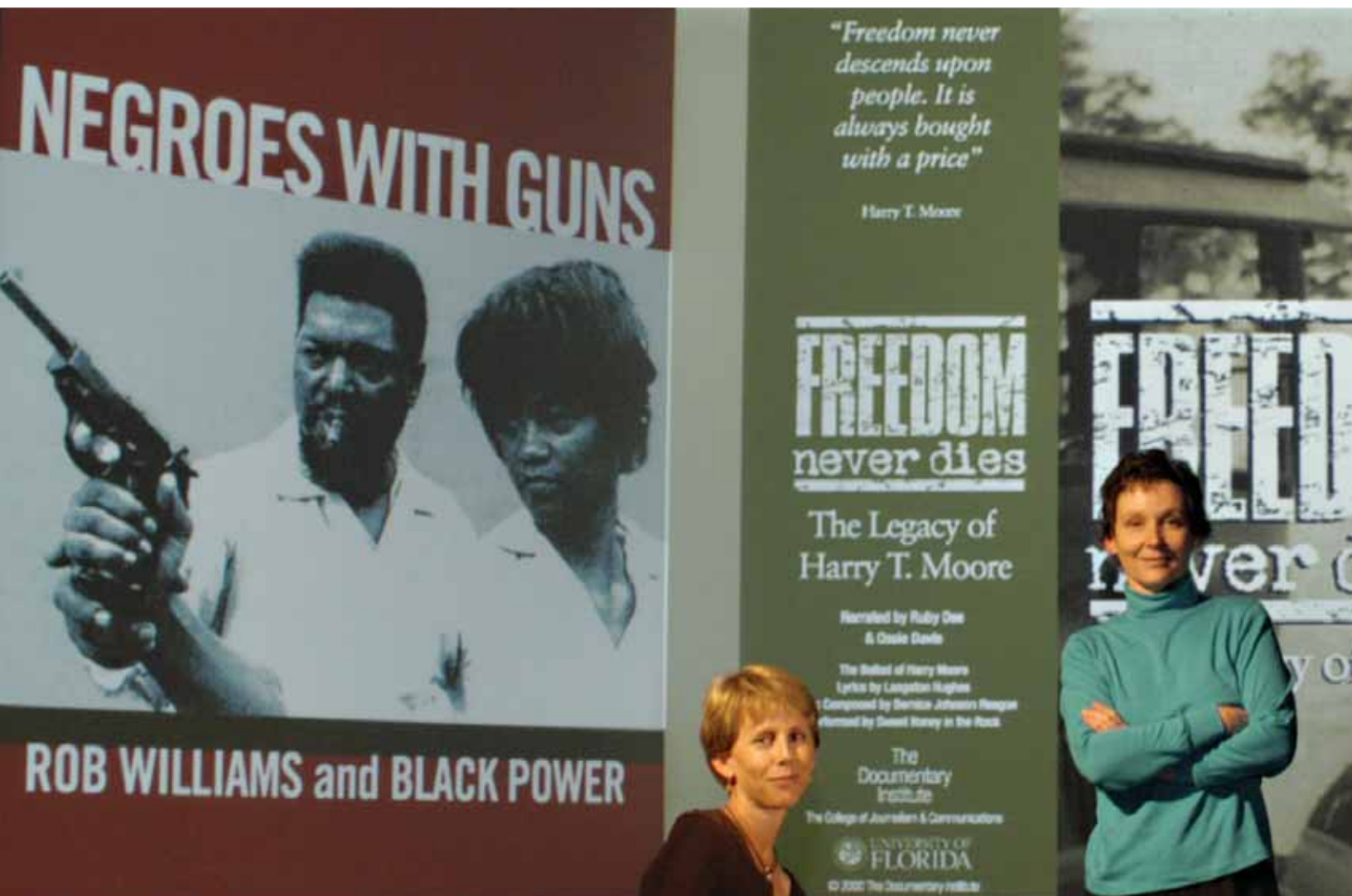
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Documenting DIFFERENCE MAKERS

BY KIMBERLY R. TAYLOR



Researcher Cara Pilson, screenwriter Sandra Dickson, cinematographer Cindy Hill and producer Churchill Roberts have collaborated on many documentaries over the last 15 years.

UF's Documentary Institute is carving a niche in the film world as a producer of fine documentaries about forgotten civil rights leaders



The life of a documentary filmmaker isn't about Versace gowns and Armani tuxes, small gold statues or nine-figure box-office revenues.

For the artists in the University of Florida's Documentary Institute, filmmaking is telling a story about people who have made a difference in the world.

"We're really drawn to stories about underdogs who have this tremendous amount of courage," says Sandra Dickson, co-director of the Documentary Institute.

Dickson and her colleagues tell stories of social justice and human rights, stories that leave a strong impression on viewers. They tell stories about people like Harry T. Moore, a pioneering civil rights advocate from central Florida.

Their recent production, *Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore*, aired nationally on PBS to impressive reviews.

“The life and death of Harry T. Moore have been largely forgotten, upstaged by later assassinations and agendas,” wrote Barbara Phillips in the *Wall Street Journal*. “This insightful documentary works to right that wrong.”

“A powerful PBS documentary pulls activist Harry T. Moore from the shadows of history and gives him his due,” adds Hal Bodeker of the *Orlando Sentinel*.

Freedom Never Dies won the Erik Barnouw award for Outstanding Historical Documentary, an award previously won by Ken Burns, famed for his historical documentaries on the Civil War and baseball.

Institute faculty Sandra Dickson, Churchill Roberts, Cindy Hill and Cara Pilson have been creating films like *Freedom Never Dies* for more than 15 years, each lending their distinctive talents to the finished product.

“We will spend six months doing research on a topic before we commit to it, in some instances only to abandon it,” Dickson says. “As a writer, there may not be enough visuals there or it just doesn’t have the drama to hold up for 56 minutes.”

After an idea passes muster, the team does another two to two and a half years of research.

“We set out to gather as much archival material as we can,” says Hill, the principal photographer. “Sometimes it’s photography, it might be film or audio recordings, or some letters that people have written.”

As the team’s primary researcher, Pilson does much of the legwork. Sometimes this means trying to track down 80-year-old people who have dusty documents hiding in their attics. For the Harry Moore documentary, the team relied heavily on his eldest daughter, Evangeline.

“Evangeline was just wonderful and really spent time in her attic pulling out all the photos she had of her father, her mother, her sister, of her as a girl — basically she made the complete family album available to us.”

Other times it means scouring major sources like the Library of Congress, the state archives or the FBI. The end result is typically thousands of pages of documents.

“It’s a paper trail that’s unbelievable,” Dickson says.

The next step is to distill the stacks of documents into chronologies, character sketches and other elements that will help tell the story.

“Basically, we try to take in as much data as we can and then go through the sorting process,” Hill says. “Then we start shooting the interviews.”

“They’re passionate about making a difference and telling the stories that they think need to be told.”

— Sandra

Documentary Institute student Sean Lewis is working on a film about alligator wrestlers.



Harry Moore's daughter Evangeline (left) looks on at a New York recording studio as actor Ossie Davis provides the voice of Harry Moore and Ruby Dee serves as the narrator for the Documentary Institute's film Freedom Never Dies.



The visual elements and the research help shape the film's structure and script, which Dickson generates through her "raw meat" model of writing.

"No one disturbs me when I write, other than to throw a piece of raw meat into the room and then quickly beat a path elsewhere," she says.

All joking aside, script-writing is an intensive process that can take months. Given all the work that goes into the script, it is crucial to find the right voice to bring it to life. *Freedom Never Dies* was narrated by actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, with music by Toshi Reagon and Sweet Honey in the Rock.

"I think when you're doing historical documentary you have to have people who can do more than just read the script," Hill says. "They really have to provide the emotional tone of the script."

Davis and Dee were obvious choices to narrate the film because they had a personal connection, having previously produced a tribute to Moore at an NAACP convention. And the music was a natural, too.

"Sweet Honey, that's really their forte," Hill says. "They had done a lot of music for previous historical documentaries so we knew they had a track record."

The institute's formula has resulted in unprecedented success. Although the Public Broadcasting Service accepts less than five percent of documentary submissions for its national broadcast schedule, four of the six Documentary Institute productions — *Giving up the Canal*, *Campaign for Cuba*, *Last Days of the Revolution* and *Freedom Never Dies* — have been selected for national distribution.

It was the prospect of that kind of success that prompted College of Journalism and Communications Dean Terry Hynes to recruit the four faculty members to UF in 1998. The team

had been working together at the University of West Florida since the 1980s.

"They were doing first-class work there, and West Florida simply didn't have the resources to support what they were doing at the time," says Hynes.

UF offered the tools and facilities the foursome needed and, in turn, they helped the college fill a critical void.

"We had every other kind of component," Hynes says, referring to the college's programs in newspaper and magazine writing, both short and long form, and programs in television broadcast and production. "It was the major piece in terms of journalism that we were missing in the college."

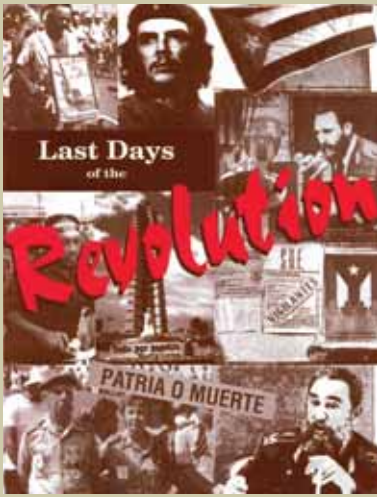
Several dozen students have gone through the program since its inaugural year, many of them producing their own award-winning documentaries.

"We get people who are just passionate about storytelling and about their social responsibility," Dickson says. "They're passionate about making a difference and telling the stories that they think need to be told."

Donna Pazdera, who earned her master's degree in Spring 2003, is a good example. Pazdera worked with John Jack and Todd Southern to produce *Sid Vision*, a short-format documentary about educational filmmaker Sid Davis.

Davis produced dozens of so-called "mental hygiene" films in the 1940s and '50s on such subjects as sexuality, hygiene, driver safety and social etiquette. One of his more memorable was *Live and Learn*, which features Davis' daughter, Jill, tripping on a carpet and impaling her herself on a pair of scissors.

While the faculty productions may be low budget by Hollywood standards, the student productions are *really* low budget at about \$5,000. In the case of *Sid Vision*, the students had to come up with many creative ways to stretch that budget,



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because much of the raw material was in southern California.

But it now seems that the sacrifices and hard work are paying off.

The film has been screened in New York City, been invited to the Palm Beach International Film Festival, been named best short documentary at the Long Beach Film Festival and won the 2003 Angelus Awards Student Film Festival.

“We really got lucky,” Pazdera says. “It wasn’t like we sat there and said, ‘I wonder what will be trendy at that point.’ It just worked out.”

Rubbing elbows at film festivals can help budding documentary filmmakers learn more about the field. Recognizing this, the college also brings noteworthy filmmakers to campus, where they talk with the students and offer advice about how to produce their own films.

Pazdera remembers meeting director D.A. Pennebaker, producer of *The War Room*, a film about Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign, as well as the Bob Dylan film *Don’t Look Back* and dozens of other films.

Perspectives from veteran filmmakers help students see how they can take what they learn and put it into action. Although faculty members are there to provide students with a strong foundation, Dickson says, “Our job is to give them some tools and then get out of the way, let them exercise their own creativity. We try to give them maximum room to do that. And yes, they’re doing incredibly.”

In addition to teaching students the mechanical and creative elements of filmmaking, Dickson and her colleagues encourage the same idealism that resonates in their own productions.

“Everything they do is infused with this wonderful sense of social responsibility, which from my perspective was compelling,” says journalism Dean Hynes. “Journalism and communications function in this society with a great deal of freedom and autonomy and part of what comes with that is a responsibility to do what we do in ways that contribute to the good of society.”

The team’s earlier films, which include *Giving up the Canal*, *Campaign for Cuba*, *Last Days of the Revolution* and *Deciding Who Dies*, focused on political affairs issues. But their last two documentaries, *Freedom Never Dies* and *Negroes with Guns*, marked a shift in direction.

“One of the things I think we’d been unhappy with for some time in the political affairs documentaries is that we felt like we couldn’t do them justice because we really needed to be in a position where at a moment’s notice you fly to Cuba or Panama so you’re there when some event takes place,” Dickson says. “Well, our first and primary job is as educators so we can’t leave in the middle of the semester to go spend a month elsewhere.”

So the team switched to historical documentaries with an emphasis on civil rights. Dickson describes *Negroes with Guns* as the raw and unsanitized story of Robert F. Williams, a civil rights leader who became a symbol for black men humiliated in the Jim Crow South in the 1950s.

“Williams dared to give public expression to the private philosophy of many African Americans that armed self-defense was not only a matter of survival but an honorable position,” Dickson says.

Williams, the forefather of the Black Power movement, was born and raised in the small town of Monroe, N.C., just outside of Charlotte. Not surprisingly, Monroe was a much different town in the 1950s than it is now.

To show how Williams’ efforts helped the town evolve, the documentary contrasts vintage black-and-white footage of segregated lunch counters and swimming pools with contemporary footage.

“We wanted to give our viewers an idea of what Monroe looked like,” Hill says. “We tried to give people a sense that Monroe is integrated now and give people an idea of Rob’s legacy.”

One of the public places that Williams fought hardest to integrate was the municipal swimming pool. *Negroes With Guns* shows that, many years later, Williams' dream was realized. The film closes with a shot of black and white children swimming in the pool together, likely unaware of the story behind it all.

The team returned to North Carolina in February, screening *Negroes With Guns* in Charlotte's Afro-American Cultural Center.

"The place was packed," Roberts says. "They were worried that the fire marshal might come in."

When the movie was screened in Monroe's public library, it set off a moving response from the capacity crowd, Roberts says.

"To have people get up afterwards and say they were so happy that they brought their son or daughter with them to see this film ... wow," Roberts says, his voice trailing off.

The Documentary Institute strives to bring the legacies and forgotten stories of activists like Rob Williams and Harry Moore back into the public spotlight.

"We like the idea of taking somebody like this who might be a forgotten hero and giving them the due they deserve," Dickson says. "We like the idea of being able to restore some of these people, to bring them to the attention of the public because they were lost over time." ✕

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Related Web site:

www.jou.ufl.edu/documentary

Steven Harris

Documentary Institute graduate students Sarah Prior and Monica Bigler shooting a subject on location in Tucson, Ariz., for their master's thesis project Buried in the Backyard — a documentary scheduled for release in May 2004 about individuals who currently build and maintain bomb shelters.

