

Mural documentary depicts rich Durham Civil Rights history

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More than a year after its completion, the Durham Civil Rights Mural lives on through Rodrigo Dorfman's artful documentary about the designing and painting of the mural.

The documentary, which premiered on Saturday, Feb. 11 at the Hayti Heritage Center, will be available for free online. Dorfman said it is a product of filming for three years.

"I'm always interested as a filmmaker in community projects, because I like to experience a diversity of voices," Dorfman said. "I believe that community-centered projects elevate the work to a level that individual projects cannot."

Dorfman said his art is centered on social justice, telling stories of people's struggles and of people who have dignity in the face of adversity. His interest in social justice drew him to document the process of creating the Durham Civil Rights Mural, which is located at 120 Morris St.

"The civil rights movement and the stories that come from it are very dramatic," Dorfman said. "They have a lot of lessons in them, and they're also living stories, so they're not just in the past. That's the whole point of making the mural and making its film, is to see how the past is living in the present."

Dorfman said what excited and inspired him in his filmmaking was the explosion of modern civil rights movements, such as Black Lives Matters, that were happening in the U.S. and in Durham while the Durham Civil Rights Mural was being painted.

"The documentary touches upon the creation of the mural, the stories of some of the people in the mural, and it touches a little upon what was happening in Durham at that time – which was the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement," Dorfman said.

Dorfman and Brenda Miller-Holmes, the director of the mural project, worked together to both fund and photograph the project, which depicts prominent leaders and visionaries in Durham during the Civil Rights Movement.

Miller-Holmes recently moved to Durham from San Francisco. While attending Durham Technical Community College, she began to learn more about local history and said she was amazed at Durham's story. She said she wanted to find a way to share this history that people might not otherwise be aware of.

"This story in particular was not mine to tell, so I had to find a way to get the community together to tell their own story," Miller-Holmes

said.

Miller-Holmes rounded up 30 core participants to collaborate in the initial design of the mural. Holmes said the participants were balanced between youth and adults, with an age range of 13 to 65.

One participant, Jhordan Perry, 28, has lived in Durham for eight years and was an integral part of the design process of the mural.

"It was awesome, it was a life-changing experience," Perry said. "It transformed me from a person who did art to an artist."

Perry said his mentorship under Dorfman and Miller-Holmes turned him into the person and the artist he is today.

"I loved being able to work with legitimate artists who did not sell themselves short in order to achieve the things that they wanted and are still following their dreams," Perry said.

He said he learned a lot from working with so many different types of people on the mural, from young to old and black to white. He said the diversity created a blending of perspectives in both the artistic style and the message within the mural.

Perry said the concept of the heads in blue in the sky at the top of the mural came from him. Holmes said these people represent early economic leaders that laid important groundwork for Black Wall Street in Durham.

Miller-Holmes said the process of deciding what would go in the mural was entirely

democratic among the group of 30 people. She said there were a lot of hard decisions on what stories to include in the mural and what imagery could engage people while still telling the truth.

She said one of the controversial elements was whether Duke Chapel should go in the mural or not. There were some people that felt strongly that it shouldn't, while others wanted to acknowledge Duke's participation in the movement.

"People didn't want Duke Chapel because Duke historically has had a really contentious relationship with the community," Miller-Holmes said.

She said the group was able to compromise by depicting Julian Abele with Duke Chapel. Abele was the African-American architect that designed Duke Chapel but was never given credit until later in the 20th century.

"My passion is really about collaborating with other people, because getting people together to share ideas is much more powerful than doing stuff on your own," Miller-Holmes said. "Especially where public art is concerned, it's not appropriate to create things without public input."

She said one of the most prominent inspirational figures she painted in the mural was Louis Austin, founder of The Carolina Times newspaper. Miller-Holmes said he was an interesting and controversial change-maker and someone whom she admires.

"I'm very proud of Durham, the film and the people that are in it," Dorfman said. "I hope that it's a beautiful mirror of what Durham was, is and can be. If we all work together and are not afraid, we can do amazing things."



The Durham Civil Rights Mural depicts Julian Abele (far left) painting Duke Chapel, Louis Austin (center) carrying a lantern and other prominent figures. (Photo by Rodrigo Dorfman)