

Hayti film festival sparks discussion

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Vendors gather in the lobby. The smell of popcorn fills the air. Mellow jazz bounces off the walls. Durham residents start finding their seats as they await the 21st annual Hayti Heritage Film Festival.

In 1891 the Saint Joseph's Church opened as a church for newly freed slaves. Sixty years later it relocated to W. Main St., and the original building was left empty.

The building was almost torn down but the community fought for it to stay standing. In 1975 it reopened as the Hayti Heritage Center at 804 Old Fayetteville St. Today it is listed on the National Historic Registry.

Angela Lee is the executive of the Saint Joseph's Historic Foundation. The SJHF is the non-profit that oversees and runs the Hayti Heritage Center. Lee has been in charge of the cultural enrichment department for three years.

"Our job here is to promote the arts and preserve the rich history of Hayti in the Durham community," said Lee.

"I simply love the arts and being a part of Hayti," Lee said while gazing at the historic records, paintings and pottery from Durham artists that decorate her office.

While walking around the Hayti Heritage Center, Lee pauses and says, "When it's just you, the space and the quiet, you can hear the voices of all the people who have crossed through this space through the years."

Many historical figures have visited the HHC site, including famous comedians like Eddie Murphy and renowned leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois.

The HHC's film festival is a way to educate people on historical and current day social issues in the community.

This year the HHC will show 21 films. The films cover a variety of topics. Some are relevant to social issues surrounding the Hayti community. Others made by local artists portray some key moments throughout Hayti history.

Thursday night's theme is "Prison, Police, and Public Images." The HHC has the projector out, the surround sound on and the popcorn ready as



SJHF executive Angela Lee shows off the historical structure of the Hayti Heritage Center, previously a church for freed slaves, hours before the first screening begins. (Staff photo by Cole McCauley)

movies are premiered.

The first film on the list is "Middle of Nowhere," written and directed by Ava DuVernay. "Middle of Nowhere" is a film about a woman whose life is changed forever when her husband goes to prison.

Straight Talk is a support group that brought the movie to the HHC.

"We're here to open a dialogue and support families who have had members either go to prison or just get released," said Bessie Elmore, Durham local and founder of Straight Talk. "When one family member goes to prison, the whole family goes with them."

Straight Talk provides everything from emotional support to classes on how to adjust back to real life when someone is released from prison.

"We've certainly seen it make an impact. Last year we even received a support letter from President Obama," Elmore said.

This year they brought members of the support group to the film festival.

"It's a way to open up a dialogue to our community and highlight some issues going on with criminal justice," said Elmore.

Following "Middle of Nowhere" was a discussion on criminal justice reforms by the Obama administration.

Bessie Elmore's son William was at

the film festival that evening. William is passionate about Straight Talk and came to the festival to share some of his experience.

"My mom would probably tell you I'm the reason for Straight Talk," said William. He has spent over half his life in prison and was released December 21, 2015 for good behavior. "I've been locked up for 24 years and I'm still trying to figure out this new world."

While watching "Middle of Nowhere" William says, "This is such a good movie. I feel like it opens the eyes to what convicts go through."

As the evening went on and the movies played out, eyes were focused on the screen and a discussion about criminal justice commenced.

Friday night will be full of movies dedicated to African Americans and sports. On Saturday, the festival will show 14 films from a variety of historical events in the African American community.

"So much talent has come through this community. So much has happened. We want this event to show all of that and get people talking again," said Lee.

As the credits roll and people get up from their seats, the stories being told throughout the Hayti community are not ending. Angela Lee promises that the film festival will be taking place again next year.