

BUFFALO FILM PREMIERE

Documentary follows 4 Buffalonians to Africa in their search for identity

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A trip to Africa changed the life of a Buffalo native who channeled the experience into documentaries about urban crime, racism, poverty and personal identity.

The first was “The Forgotten City,” a 2006 film about a young Buffalo man murdered by a robber who wanted his DVD player and gold chain.

Addison Henderson’s latest offering, “The Experience,” premieres Saturday and follows four Buffalonians to Africa on a search for identity — but not in terms of skin color or ancestral bloodlines. Instead, it deals with internal identity and one’s purpose in life, said the 28-year-old filmmaker.

“You see what was lost in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It makes you wonder what could have been,” Henderson said. “You wonder, ‘What is my purpose?’ ”

“The Experience” — which premieres at 6 p. m. in Buffalo State College’s Rockwell Hall — chronicles the characters’ journey to Ghana and follows up with them two years later. It shows how they were affected by the trip and how they returned to Buffalo with more purpose and focus, Henderson said.

It was a similar transformation for the young filmmaker himself after his first trip to West Africa four years ago for missionary work with his father, Bishop William Henderson, longtime pastor of Michigan Street Baptist Church, one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad for escaping slaves.

That 2005 trip “totally transformed” him, the younger Henderson said. The realization that millions traveled through the slave castles of West Africa, that some of them did not complete the journey and that many were buried at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean was a turning point for him.

“When I went to Africa and came back, I became more focused and purpose-driven,” he said. “Just being there was really an experience. You get these feelings. You can still smell the stench like a very pungent body odor that will probably never leave.”

When he came back, he started working on “The Forgotten City” based on the murder of his friend Jermaine Cross in 2001 in his Zenner Street home. He collaborated with Korey Green, a friend of the killer, and they set off in search of answers, examining the killing and the underlying forces that lead to such violence. It won “Best Urban Documentary” at the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival in 2006.

Green also went to Ghana for “The Experience” and, like Henderson, said it was a transformational experience.

After he came back from Africa two years ago, Green’s new sense of purpose led him to make the annual summer block party on Delavan Avenue more than a social event. So he invited prominent local figures, like Mayor Byron W. Brown, to address the teens in attendance to motivate them to be better individuals and to let them “know there’s a lot of other things out there besides what they are exposed to,” Green said.

“We would normally do a regular block party anyway, but we started calling it a ‘stop the violence’ block party,” he said. “We try to talk to them and inspire them.”

Now the two filmmakers, along with executive producer Jamie Moss, hope their latest offering will inspire similar changes in those who see it.

“I wanted to go back [to Africa] and talk about identity because I knew what Africa had done for me,” Henderson said. “I thought maybe the audience will have an epiphany moment, and maybe the audience can experience that just the way I did.”

“We would like audiences . . . to walk away with a feeling of hope and renewed spirit,” said Green, co-producer on both films.

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