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Thursday, December 10, 2009

This Life Ain't Pretty

Locally produced short film debuts at UIS

BY ZACH BALIVA



Statistics are often hard to remember. We might forget that 1.1 million Americans are living with HIV/AIDS or that the global total is more than 30 million. We might not know that 25 percent of them don't know they have a disease. We might not recall that there are 44,000 new HIV cases each year, that more than half of them are African Americans, and that AIDS is the leading cause of death for black women between the ages of 15 and 44.

Rudyard Kipling once said, "If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten."

That's the idea behind Kimberly D. Conner's short film *This Life Ain't Pretty*, which premiered at UIS' Brookens Auditorium Dec. 1.

The day was World AIDS day, and Conner managed to more than fill the university's 192-seat theater with cast, crew, friends and supporters. More than 50 viewers were left to stand in the back of the packed screening room, clutching info-filled tote bags distributed by the Coalition for Black Trade Unions.

Conner, who says she was "blown away" by the turnout, drew on a real-life tragedy for inspiration. *This Life Ain't Pretty* relates the story of Conner's first cousin, who died after contracting HIV from her husband. "From this experience, I saw a need, which led to a desire to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS in the community... This story is a vehicle to get the message out and to dispel the myths and stereotypes associated with the disease," she says.

The 35-minute film, which was shot in Springfield last July and took four months to edit, marks Conner's directorial debut. Several investors, including the Springfield Urban League, helped provide part of Conner's \$10,000 budget. Cameron Counts, president of the Springfield and Central Illinois Film Commission, says his group assisted by coordinating extras, suggesting crew members and distributing audition news through its Web site and database. Counts also appears in the movie. "This would not have been possible without the support of local churches and businesses. Without them, we would not have been able to make the film," says Conner. The Old State Capital Plaza, St. John's Hospital and World Peace Taxi are a few local icons featured on-screen.

The movie shows an example of an everyday, "unlikely" AIDS victim, and Conner says the moviemaking process and her real-life experience taught her to look at AIDS victims differently. "It opened my eyes to the fact of it happening to regular people," she explains.

Danielle Ward plays the film's protagonist, who tells us she never thought she could get HIV/AIDS because she's not gay, doesn't use drugs, doesn't cheat, doesn't have multiple sexual partners, and feels and looks fine. The movie opens at the character's funeral, where a pastor reminds us that "color doesn't matter, gender doesn't matter, social class doesn't matter [and] neighborhood doesn't matter." That idea, written by Conner, was shared earlier in our May 7, 2009, issue as she prepared for auditions, telling R.L. Nave: "It doesn't matter what you look like, what kind of car you drive, where you live, how much money you have in your bank account — none of that matters."

Ward was drawn to her part, she says, for the chance to help raise awareness of AIDS-related issues. "The topic is still not talked about enough in the black community and the community as a whole. It should be talked about more in churches, homes...everywhere."

Natalie Randall addressed the crowd during a post-screening Q&A, saying, "People are embarrassed to talk about testing. I get tested every three to six months. We have to come together and not be afraid. I'm HIV negative. Go get tested. If you're scared to go alone, I'll go with you."

Conner graduated with honors from Eastern Illinois University, where she studied in the Board of Trustees Program and minored in psychology. Although *Pretty* marks her first time directing, her previous scripts have made it into the final rounds of The University of Southern California Screenwriting Program, The Hollywood Black Film Festival, The Urban Mediamakers Film Festival, and The Creative Screenwriting Magazine AAA Competition. She lives in Springfield and is an employee of the state Department of Healthcare and Family Services.

This Life Ain't Pretty was recently entered in BET's short film competition, and Conner says she has plans to hit the festival circuit. For now, DVDs are available by contacting her production company through its Web site (<http://www.predestinedartsandentertainment.com/>) or the movie's Web site (<http://thislifeaintprettythemovie.com/>).

Zach Baliva is a filmmaker living in Springfield.