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Documentary uses N-word

Augusta State professor hopes his film will provoke discussion of racial divisions

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By **Steven Uhles**
Staff Writer

Words are a funny thing. The simple act of grouping together letters can empower or destroy, encourage or degrade. More often than not, the meanings are clear, cut and dried.

Sometimes, however, the linguistic waters get muddy.

It was that gray area that Ken Wyatt, a documentary filmmaker and a telecommunications professor at Augusta State University, wanted to explore. But his was not a simple investigation of language and usage. Instead, Mr. Wyatt wanted to poke the fire and get people talking. His film *Remove Nigger From My Name* explores the history, myths and usage of the racial epithet.

“Making this was a real discovery for me,” Mr. Wyatt said. “I found that there are so many ways that the word is used. It might designate equality in a racist society, or it might be a term of empowerment, taking ownership of the word to drain it of its power. But I feel that is pseudo-



Ken Wyatt, in the TV studio at Augusta State University's Hardy Hall, has made a film on the use of a racial slur.

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power. It isn't true power."

Mr. Wyatt began exploring the black community's use of the term while teaching at Temple University in Philadelphia. He said that while walking on campus he would hear the word tossed around in an almost jocular fashion. Because he took great offense to the word, he was curious about how it was perceived by others. Until then his documentary work had centered on jazz, but he felt this was a subject worthy of investigation.

"This was something our leaders never even talked about. King never talked about it. Malcom X never talked about it. People are afraid to address it. That's what I wanted to do, though, talk about those things people should have covered and didn't."

The result is a 23-minute film that features interviews with notable members of the black community, including Dr. Alvin Poussaint, associate dean for student affairs at Harvard Medical School; rapper Q-Tip; and comedy writer Paul Mooney. Mr. Wyatt is expanding the film into a feature-length documentary.

"This summer, I hope to finish the post-production on the larger documentary," he said. "Then I'd like to have it seen, maybe go on the lecture circuit with it. What I want is for people to see it and talk about it. I want to provoke."

Originally envisioned as a sort of tribute to the black community, Mr. Wyatt said, *Remove Nigger From My Name* crosses racial lines.

"As it turns out, I was making it for everybody," he said. "Everybody gets something out of it. This is something that white people don't feel comfortable talking to black people about, so it's for them as well. This gives them access to the subject, and that's what making documentaries is all about, granting access."

Mr. Wyatt has shown the shorter version at museums and entered it at festivals, with varying degrees of success. He said there are people who see nigger in the title and immediately dismiss it.

"There was an outdoor festival in Philadelphia, a black festival, and they saw the title and didn't want it to play," he said. "They thought it would be too controversial. There are people out there who just don't want to rock the boat. That's actually been the toughest obstacle."

But shouldering burdens doesn't bother Mr. Wyatt. He explained that hurdles are an important part of the filmmaking process. They keep the filmmaker focused and motivated.

"That's what this is all about, overcoming those obstacles," he said. "If you don't have the drive, then you need to drop the project. You really have to feel like you'll die if you don't get your film made. It's funny because everybody at some point gets handed something, some great idea. Right now this is mine, and I have to go with it."

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