

Wyatt meets his neighbors in 'Pray for Eric'

Toward the end of "Pray for Eric," Ken Wyatt's latest documentary, he stumbles upon a roadside billboard that for years has stood in the hills near where Eric Rudolph was captured and extremist militias were rumored to thrive.

"God, send us someone to cure AIDS, cancer, etc., etc.," and, "I did, but you aborted them," reads the sign, in stark, capital letters.

With some trepidation, Wyatt, an assistant professor of media production at East Carolina University, approaches the home on the property, but no one answers his knock at the door. Neighbors do, however, and they are collegial to Wyatt, a black, city-raised professor from upstate New York who, if stereotypes were to be believed, would find himself at odds with townspeople. Time after time, Wyatt's on-camera interviewees distance themselves from Rudolph, extremism and all of the negative stereotypes that Murphy, population 1,600, came to embody in many people's minds after the bomber's capture in May 2003.

At that time, many media reports seized upon controversial signs, T-shirts and other local statements of support for Rudolph, a terrorist who bombed Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta, a lesbian bar and two clinics where abortions were performed. The documentary title has its roots in a sign of the same name displayed by a now-defunct diner that showed support for Rudolph.

Wyatt had read and watched the reports with disbelief. "Why wouldn't they want to help catch a serial killer? I didn't understand that," Wyatt said. But he wanted to. When he joined ECU in 2007, he decided the time had come, despite warnings from family and friends, to learn about his neighbors to the west. Did they support Rudolph? Were they zealots and bigots?

His brother, the beneficiary of Wyatt's life insurance, suggested Wyatt up his coverage before he made the trek. Others warned him to take a gun. "I said, 'I'll go armed with a camera as my only protection,'" he said.

The result, "Pray for Eric," is more conversational than confrontational, as Wyatt explores the feelings of area residents — store clerks, a journalist, Murphy Mayor William Hughes — and authorities on the region, including Southern Poverty Law Center militia expert Mark Potok and Karl Campbell, an associate professor at Appalachian State University.

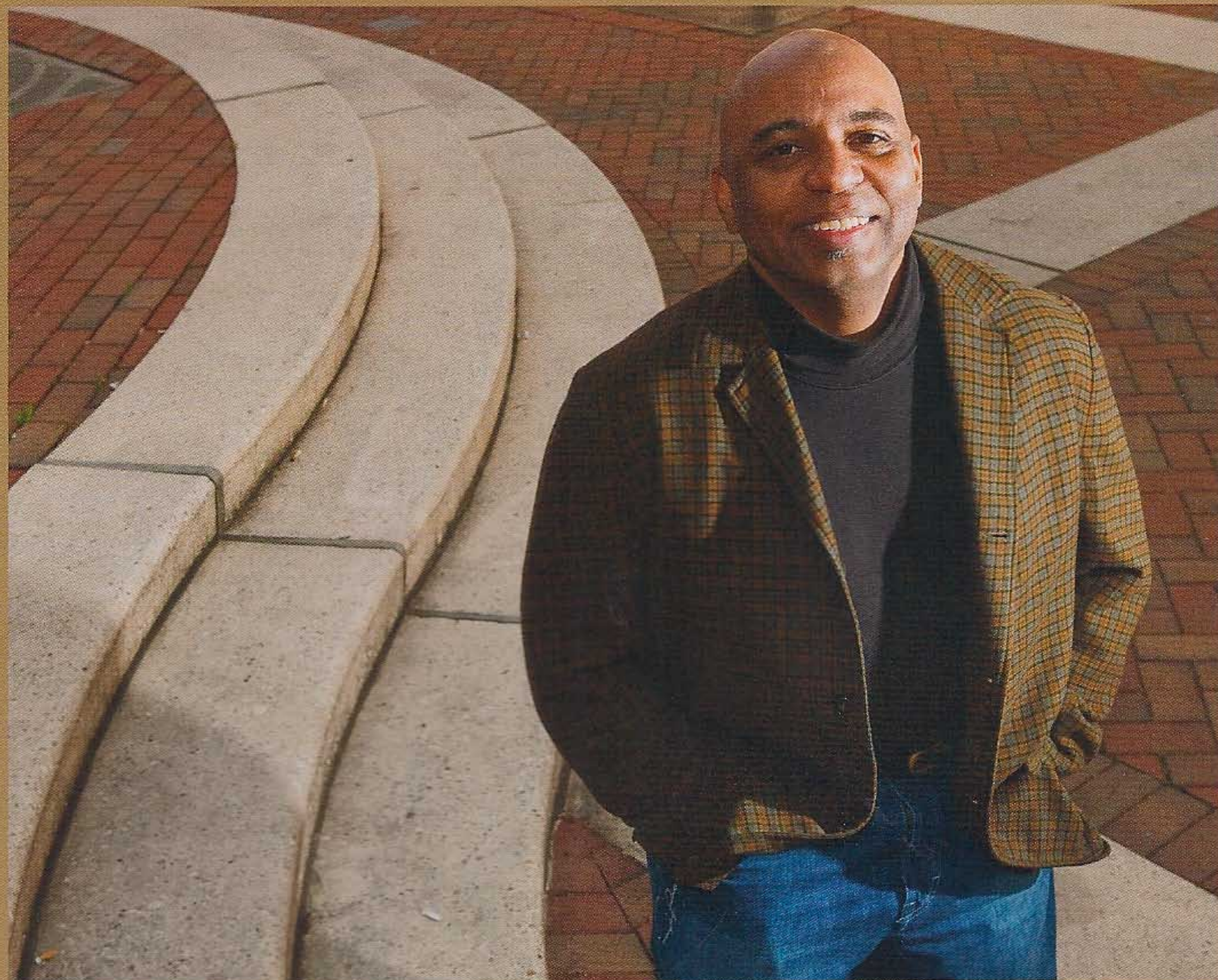
The documentary was completed with grants from ECU for \$57,463 and ECU's College of Fine Arts & Communication for \$7,859, while the Southern Documentary Fund offered in-kind support. "I think one of the reasons I came to ECU is [the university] seemed so supportive of what I was doing," Wyatt said. "I don't know that I'd be able to do this at some other schools."

After premiering at the San Diego Black

Film Festival in January, "Pray For Eric," won the "Best Coming of Age Film" award at the Mountain Film Festival in Mammoth Lakes, Calif., the following month. It also has screened at the Texas Black Film Festival in Dallas, the Bare Bones Film Festival and the XXV Black International Cinema Berlin 2010.

Next up for Wyatt is "Colored Confederates," a documentary about African-American soldiers who fought on the losing side of the Civil War. Wyatt, who counts among his influences famed documentarian Errol Morris and experimental 1940s filmmaker Maya Deren, said he approaches projects as a truth seeker.

"I want to do stuff people haven't seen," he said. ■



Ken Wyatt, a School of Communication faculty member, made a film about bomber Eric Rudolph.