

Coming to Terms with America's Civil Rights Struggle: A Community Outreach Endeavor

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Abstract

Conversations about race relations in the United States was and still is a subject that is difficult for many to discuss. In an effort to address this complex and vital issue at local levels, the National Endowment for the Humanities partnered with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History during the summer of 2013 to provide communities across the country the opportunity to discuss race in a more meaningful way. Out of this partnership the Created Equal project was born, offering successful grant writers the chance to screen four documentary films that illustrate how little or how much race relations have changed since the dawn of the civil rights movement. The project required that the recipient's partner within the local community, with colleges and universities, and with civic groups to promote the films and facilitate conversations on race and race relations. The Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center Library (NMBCCCL) at Indiana University in Bloomington (IUB), Indiana, is one of the many applicants selected to receive the \$1200 stipend and film collection. This article highlights the challenges and opportunities encountered at the NMBCCCL.

Keywords: race, civil rights, film series, community outreach

Introduction

The troubling history of race relations among people in the United States is evident even in the 21st century where it is still a subject that is often too difficult to discuss without controversy and hard feelings. In order to make the discussion easier for individuals, as well as communities across the country, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in partnership with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (GLIAH) has created a unique outreach opportunity sponsoring a series called, Created Equal: America's Civil Rights Struggle. This series features four documentary films that highlight the issues of civil rights in America.

The series was established to coincide with the anniversaries of the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and the March on Washington (1963). The overall goal of the partnership is to allow communities throughout the United States to use the documentary films to initiate public conversations on the meaning of freedom and equality in America (<http://createdequal.neh.gov/>).

A competitive grant application was launched during the spring/summer of 2013 via the Internet and distributed widely to libraries colleges, universities, and community groups. The films are being screened in more than 500 communities and will be shown from September 2013 to December 2016 (<http://createdequal.neh.gov/>). NMBCCCL began its film screenings during the fall semester of 2013 and will continue the screenings until the end of the 2014-2015 academic year.

Background on the films

The four films making up the series are the Emmy-nominated, *The Abolitionists* (2013) and *The Loving Story* (2011); and Emmy-winning, *The Freedom Riders* (2011) and *Slavery by Another Name* (2012).

The Abolitionists (2013), directed by Rob Rapley, tells the story of five powerful players in the abolitionist movement: newspaper editor, William Lloyd Garrison; former slave and author, Frederick Douglass; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* author, Harriet Beecher Stowe; slave owner-daughter turned abolitionist, Angelina Grimke; and John Brown who executed the attack on Harper's Ferry.

Slavery by Another Name (2012), directed by Sam Pollard, is based on Pulitzer Prize winner Douglass Blackmon's book of the same title. This film explores the tale of Southerners, mostly men, who were arrested, bought, sold, abused, and forced to work under deadly and dangerous conditions as unpaid convict labor (<http://createdequal.neh.gov/>).

The Freedom Riders (2011), directed by Stanley Nelson, shares the story of both blacks and whites who took the civil rights fight on the road.

The Loving Story (2011), directed by Nancy Burski, tells the story of Mildred and Richard Loving, an interracial couple who were arrested in July 1958 for violating Virginia's miscegenation laws that banned interracial marriages. The film chronicles the legal troubles throughout many years of this, then controversial issue with the case eventually going all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Interviews and pictures for the film are drawn from interviews with Life Magazine (<http://createdequal.neh.gov/>).

Challenges

With the grant, NMBCCCL staff understood that part of its obligation was to promote the films community-wide. Promotional flyers were created and distributed throughout the Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center, the NMBCCCL, and the Herman B Wells Library (Wells Library). Another technique used was connecting with the Bloomington community through the community listserv so that Bloomington residents could get information about the screenings. Additionally, the Created Equal listserv was used as a form of communication and support. Placement of promotional materials regarding the times and dates of the screenings on the list, proved to be an effective way keeping with the stipulations of the grant award. This communication method also proved to be a successful vehicle for getting the word out regionally; in fact, another grant recipient, the Knox County Public Library was present at the first screening, *The Loving Story*. The NMBCCCL's Facebook page was used to promote the series as well to its "library friends."

The second challenge was setting dates for the screenings. During the planning process, it was mutually agreed among staff that the films would be screened on Saturdays and on Mondays, in case of conflicts or just to give students the opportunity to come view the films while experiencing down time on campus. The other reason for choosing Saturdays and Mondays was the assumption that people living and working in the surrounding areas would have more free time on those days and the campus parking situation is less stressful on the weekends. Getting the community involved was also a challenge. The first film screened was, *The Loving Story*. Unfortunately, audience turnout for the showing was low. However, the NMBCCCL staff determined that the low attendance was not for lack of campus interest (viewership included staff, faculty and library users). A range of factors (i.e., bad weather, conflicting campus events) contributed to the low attendance numbers, therefore it was decided to give *The Loving Story* a second screening.

A third challenge was making sure the NMBCCCL was in compliance with all the rules stipulated by the Created Equal project. Despite the unexpected low turnout, staff were confident that because of the aggressive promotion strategies instituted following the first screening, the snags would work themselves out and there would be wider audience participation during subsequent screenings. Staff were pleased that Wells Library was given the opportunity to participate, promote, and create awareness in young adults of the educational value of the films and the unique learning experience for those interested in the civil rights movement and the history and life of African Americans living in the United States during the middle and late 20th century.

The next film screened was *The Abolitionists*. This film was shown during the University-wide celebration of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday and also during Black

History Month. The film was divided into three parts for a showing time totaling more than three hours; ultimately, it was screened in segments on three occasions. The reason for segmenting the film was so that the audience would not be overwhelmed because of the film's length. To change the dynamics and the way we were showing the films, the library staff decided to run the films in the NMBCCCL instead of in the Exhibit Room. This allowed library users taking a break to watch the film as well as those coming in specifically to watch and appreciate the educational value of the film. With the film running in its entirety for the four hours the library is operational on Saturdays, we now felt confident about the remaining films and the end of series celebration, scheduled for the fall of 2014. These techniques proved successful in garnering interest in the films already screened and those yet to be screened.

The second film screening took place in the spring of 2014 with the idea of implementing new strategies for attracting a bigger audience. One strategy involved reaching out to colleagues at the Wells Library to promote the films via social media. Although, the NMBCCCL staff had already used this strategy, the Wells Library has a wider reach in connecting with people missed during the initial promotions. Another strategy was the use of Twitter by the NMBCCCL to reach out to younger audiences who may never heard of or read about the events that happen collectively in each film. The staff also reached out via email to select faculty of the Indiana University (IU) History Department faculty hoping to partner with them by offering students extra credit to attend the screenings. This proved successful because some of the faculty did decide to offer their students extra credit.

During the summer of 2014, the film, *Freedom Riders* will be shown for the first time as a part of the Juneteenth Celebration, the oldest celebration recognizing the ending of slavery in the United States. Working with the local Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Commission, plans for screening the film will include community involvement, and promotion of the film series on the NMBCCCL's Facebook page, Twitter feed, and through the distribution of creative flyers. The library is also considering inviting an actual freedom rider to the end-of-year screening of all four films. This gives the students, staff, and faculty of IU as well as the Bloomington community an opportunity to interact with a living person belonging to an earlier period of time. Finding an actual freedom rider may prove to be a challenge, however it's hoped that the NMBCCCL will be successful in achieving this goal for attending the screenings.

Opportunities

Receiving the grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American

History encouraged us to learn, have conversations, promote widely, and showcase the good work of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and the National Endowment for the Humanities through respective websites featured on all the promotional materials created by NMBCCCL. Working with these films enabled the library to engage with the greater IUB community as well as with the local Bloomington community in educating and reeducating the public about this critical period in American history. Showing all the films at the NMBCCCL was a great tool in introducing new clients to the library's collections, ongoing exhibits, readers' advisory, and the African American classic book shelf. Watching the films exposed attendees to the history of interracial marriage (*The Loving Story*), and provided a more in-depth look inside the challenges, burdens, and successes of the abolition movement (*The Abolitionists*).

At the first screening, viewers discussed the film, shared their opinions, and asked questions. The engagement in discussion increased the knowledge base of the participants – the kind of outcome hoped for by the NEH and the GLIAH. Showing the films ultimately proved to be both a challenge and an opportunity. Staff shared that the opportunities were greater than the challenges because the project enabled them to build on their outreach skills in order to promote the film series and the library collections. Lastly, this opportunity has given NMBCCCL a chance to stand out among other campus libraries, to promote it as a place where teaching and learning can take place, and to prove that conversations on race can occur in a safe and civil environment.

The hope is that with community and university members' participating in these conversations feelings and thoughts will emerge to the forefront becoming an invaluable contribution to the ongoing conversations on race and race relations in the United States and Indiana. These conversations would not have been possible without the help, support and guidance of the staff at the GLIAH and the stipend provided by the NEH together in their work to help promote the conversation on civil rights in America and also to further expose the struggles and hardships of African Americans in the United States. The NMBCCCL will continue the film screenings throughout 2014-2015.

Conclusion

As we move forward into the upcoming academic school year, NMBCCCL and its staff are poised and confident about the screenings of the last two films in the series: *Slavery by Another Name* and *Freedom Riders*.

The staff of NMBCCCL will continue exploring new avenues and ways to welcome the general public as well as the campus community into the library, and will continue promoting conversations on race. The challenges faced during the 2013-2014 academic school year were simply a catalyst for experimentation and provided more opportunities for the upcoming 2014-2015 season.

Libraries interested in hosting a film series but lack funds to help facilitate the cost, should consider searching collections for items on subjects to consider for screenings. For example, the NMBCCCL hosted a screening using films the IUB libraries owned. We titled the series, "Opening the Dialogue: A film series on 'Culture,' Identity, and Critical Media Literacy" and selected these films: Howard Zinn's, *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train*; *The American Ruling Class*; *Life & Debt*; *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*; *Young, Muslim, French*; and, *Beyond Killing Us Softly: The Impact of Media Images on Women and Girls*. We also hosted a Native American Film Festival where films such as *Alcatraz is not an Island*; *Homeland*; *The Spirit of Annie Mae*; and, *Smoke Signals* were screened.

When doing a film screening, it is important to remember to make sure the films are used for educational purposes and that public performance rights have been purchased for the screenings. Also, gather input from the librarians and staff when planning programs, whether film screenings, poetry readings, or crafts and academic workshops, and remember to include as many partners as possible whether from the local community or the university in order to reach the widest audience possible. Third, consider having facilitators / speakers to enlighten and engage the audience in discussions relating to the films being shown, make sure that both the library and the speaker's schedules blend well together. Speakers do not have to be librarians but those who have an interest in or knowledge of or participated in the civil rights movement. One last thing to note is that libraries should pursue every avenue available for publicizing their programs. This can include using social media, as well as the more traditional ways of advertising such as flyers, emails, and invitations. The more aggressive and creative you are with promoting your programs, the more success you will have reaching your audience with your message.