

Premiere of part 4 in North Richmond film saga draws crowd



Filmmaker Doug Harris, left, with Annie King-Meredith and John Gioia (Robert Rogers/RichmondConfidential)

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An outtake from the movie

North Richmond is unique, and it's a place with heart.

That was the undeniable theme Wednesday night, as about 200 people packed City Council chambers for the premiere of “An Exploration of Our History, North Richmond Part 4,” a documentary produced by filmmaker Doug Harris and more than a dozen young people from the neighborhood.

“This film represents the final piece,” Harris told the audience, which brimmed with civic leaders and dozens of community members seen in the film. “I see a lot of faces that will appear in the film. Don't be shocked if you see yourself.”

“Part 4” represented the culmination more than a decade of documenting the history of the unique community, which went from a tiny rural outpost to a bustling, hastily-erected enclave of mostly African American residents with the onset of World War II. It covers the community's history from 1970 to the present day.

And what a history it is. The hour-plus film probes the highs and lows of the isolated, landlocked neighborhood, which has long grappled with violence and pollution but bustled with culture and passionate voices.

Over a soundtrack that often strummed with tight banjos and was largely narrated by County Supervisor John Gioia, the movie explored North Richmond's 1970s era when it was referred to as “Dodge City,” because of the gambling and gunfights that punctuated the dusty times, and a 1980s and 1990s marred by exploding an exploding trade in illicit drugs, along with a corresponding withering of the local business base and public funds being hollowed out by the property tax reductions of Proposition 13. A 1993 chemical spill from a nearby plant sent thousands to the hospital, and numerous attempts to have the unincorporated portion of North Richmond annexed into the city all failed.

But the area's hope and energy never slacked, the film's interviewees insisted. Among the high points, they said, were the creation of the municipal advisory council – which helped organize neighbors into a political voice – and the establishment of a mitigation fund for community development, with monies provided by fees assessed to a nearby waste transfer station. The promise of the future loomed large as well, with a lengthy segment devoted to the promise of new housing developments on formerly agricultural lands, developments that will enlarge the population of the 4,000-plus resident community and infuse new economic life.

Over the years, the documentary history project has been funded by a variety of sources, including the mitigation fund, The California Endowment and Contra Costa County.

“This isn't just a history, this is a youth development project,” Gioia said. “In 1999, Doug Harris wanted to create a history using kids to help tell the story. It's really about the young people who put their effort into using their skills to tell their story.”

The film included a who's who of North Richmond residents and leaders, both from today and the past. Among those featured prominently included longtime local leaders Annie King-Meredith, Corinne Sain, Johnny White and Henry Clark, along with former County Supervisor Tom Powers and Richmond Police Captain Mark Gagan. Among the audience were city leaders including Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, Councilmen Corky Booze and Nat Bates, and a representative from Congressman George Miller's office.

The film also included lengthy excerpts of beloved North Richmond humanitarian Fred Jackson. His interviews were filmed several months before his death from cancer last year. It was Jackson who closed the film with a touching nod to North Richmond's resilience in the face of adversity.

“North Richmond will never die,” Jackson said.

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