

# Life Lessons At Sundance

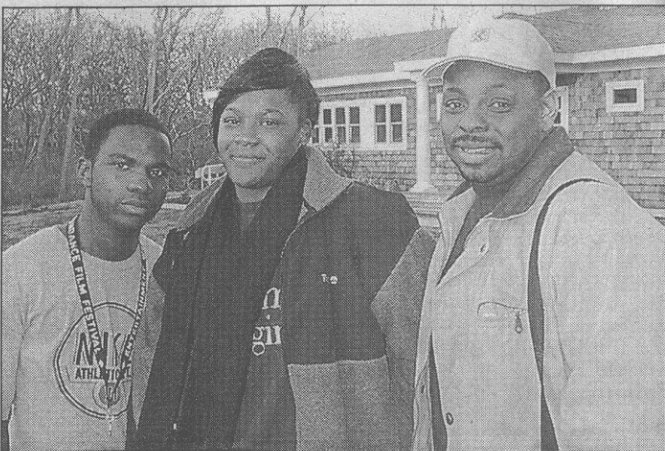
## High school students get taste of Hollywood

By Amy K. Spees

Two first-time filmmakers from Bridgehampton High School had a chance to rub elbows recently with the movers and shakers of the independent film industry at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. The two students, Willie Jenkins and Johnelle Crews, both agreed in a recent interview that although they loved Utah and the experiences the festival had to offer, it was making friends, learning about other cultures and sharing a commonality with their peers that made their trip so special.

The Sundance Film Festival is recognized internationally as a showcase for the best in new American independent film. Each year members of the Sundance Institute view more than 3,000 submissions to choose 100 or so feature-length films and 60 shorts for exhibition. Last year the institute began a program called the Generation Y Studio, which offers high school students from the United States and around the world a chance to learn the art of telling a story, share ideas, explore film, and participate in discussions meant to foster cultural awareness.

Ms. Crews and Mr. Jenkins were participants in a media workshop at the Bridgehampton Child Care Center organized by Black Media Foundation co-founders, Clarence Sheppard and Natalie Byfield. The Black Media Foundation is a non-profit organization that works with mostly inner city youths to introduce them to the basics of media, including print and film production. When the



Willie Jenkins, Johnelle Crews and Clarence Sheppard outside the Bridgehampton Child Care Center after their return from Utah.

foundation was contacted by the Sundance Institute to see if anyone there knew any students who would benefit from participating in the Generation Y Studio, Mr. Sheppard suggested Ms. Crews and Mr. Jenkins.

Supporters of the Child Care Center scraped together funds and the two students left their midterm exams behind to travel to Utah with Mr. Sheppard. While at the festival the group stayed with host families to avoid unnecessary costs. Their rigorous schedule of movies and lectures began around 8:30 a.m. and lasted well into the evening. They saw three films a day and participated in panel discussions with the Generation Y Studio from 5 to 9 p.m.

The panels—favorite activities for both students—focused on topics like world and community issues, multiracial media and racism. Mr. Jenkins said he was glad to have the opportunity to learn about other cultures and the issues they face. "I learned that everybody has problems and no matter how big or small they seem, everyone's significant," he said. "We talked about everything from relating to our parents to the religious conflict between Pakistan and Israel, and everyone's opinion mattered," he said.

Ms. Crews particularly enjoyed a film made by B.B., a Generation Y Studio student from The Bronx. It documented B.B. coping with and finally overcoming a communication gap between herself and her father. Her film was part of a broader project in which 10 students were given cameras and asked to tape their lives. The end result, Ms. Crews said, was a touching story about personal issues other high school students were going through, including being gay and dealing with family problems.

The group watched and critiqued films and got to meet cast members, production crew and other staff and discuss with them what it took to make the movie. "We got to see different movies, about different people, from different backgrounds, that we normally may not have gone to see," said Mr. Sheppard. The two students said they shared similar opinions when it came to most of the movies, but a 20-minute debate ensued when the students were discussing their favorite and least favorite films.

Ms. Crews's favorite movie was "30 to Life." It explored the feelings of a group of 29-year-old adults as they approached their 30th birthday. Mr. Jenkins said he too enjoyed "30 to

Life," but his favorite movie was "The Road Home," directed by Zhang Yimou and the winner of the World Cinema Audience Award. To which Ms. Crews replied, "Don't even get me started," as it was her least favorite.

"The Road Home" was a love story about a Chinese couple whose infatuation turned into love as their arranged marriage began to evolve. The story was told from memory by the son of the couple involved, after his father has died. The tale was so famous the whole village knew of their love for one another and how the wife would wait at the end of the road for her husband to come home. "I thought it was one of the best movies there," said Mr. Jenkins.

Ms. Crews, however thought the image of the woman portrayed in the movie was unrealistic. She thought the woman's infatuation, which left her standing at the end of the road during a blizzard, was ridiculous, not romantic.

While on the trip, the students made a film of their reactions to the festival which they plan to screen along with the movie they are finishing in their media workshop with Mr. Sheppard. Both will be shown at the grand opening of a newly renovated community building at the Bridgehampton Child Care Center in the end of February or the beginning of March.

Though neither student wants to pursue a career in film, both plan on exploring film ideas. Ms. Crews said she would either like to make a documentary on her life, a film that discusses the way women are portrayed in rap videos, or a movie about the double standard under which a woman with a lot of male friends is automatically considered promiscuous, while a male with a lot of female friends is considered an icon. Ms. Crews said she would either like to become a nurse or own a flower shop.

Mr. Jenkins also said he has ideas for upcoming film projects. He would like to do a project on rap music and one on poverty in the Bridgehampton community. "When people think of Bridgehampton most of the time all they think about are rich people," the student filmmaker said, "I want to open people's eyes." Mr. Jenkins said he'd like to become an audio engineer or audio technician and, he hopes, a rap artist. He put together the soundtrack for the two students' film project and included some of his own lyrics to accompany it.



Willie Jenkins behind the lens.



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