

Closer to the truth through film

by Deborah R. Meyer

On November 3, 1979 in Greensboro, members of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party opened fire on a gathering of political activists and labor organizers. Five died and 10 were wounded. The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) was established to examine these events and began doing so in 2004.

Adam Zucker is a lifelong New Yorker and had never been to Greensboro. In 2002, he heard that there was going to be a truth commission in the United States and he got interested in making a film about them using this American example to make it more attractive to American audiences.

"When I got to Greensboro I was very impressed by the energy, commitment and fortitude of the people driving the truth effort. At the same time I was immediately struck by how much resistance and lack of interest there seemed to be in a city of a quarter of a million people. It became clear to me that the film would be about what was happening in North Carolina, not about other truth commissions, and that the city itself would be an integral part of the film," Zucker said.

Zucker went to Greensboro 25 times over a three-year period to make the 83-minute documentary, "Greensboro: Closer to the Truth." It premiered in 2007 and includes the stories of wounded survivors, those widowed during the attack, and those responsible for the assault.

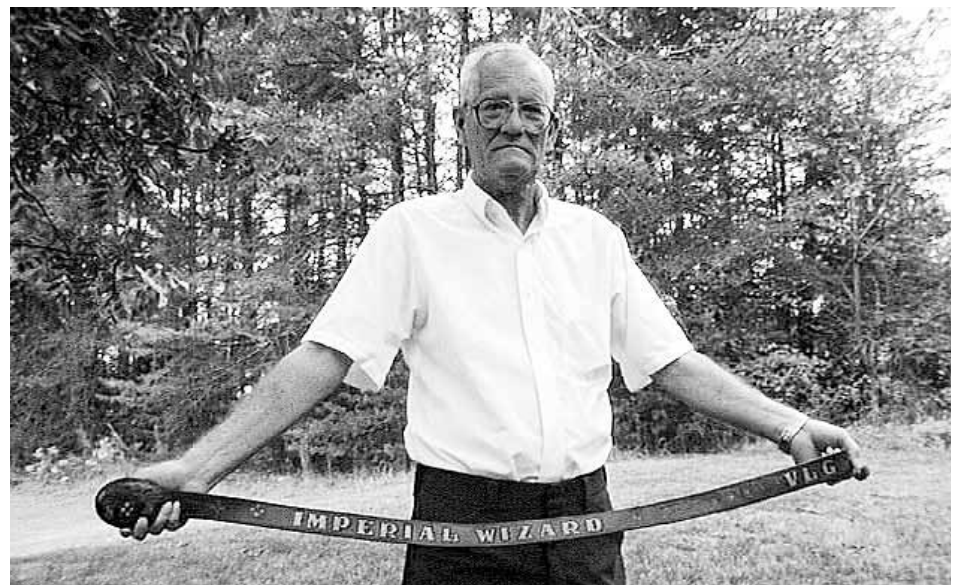
This documentary, along with four

other documentaries and narratives, is part of the free RACE in NC: Justice & Reconciliation Film Forum, which will explore local African American history, race relations, social justice and reconciliation issues that drew national attention. Free screenings with filmmakers Zucker, Timothy B. Tyson (Blood Done Sign My Name), Godfrey Cheshire (Moving Midway), and guest speakers like Daryl Hunt, the subject of the film, "The Trials of Daryl Hunt," made by Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg, will take place February 26 at Jordan-Matthews High School in Siler City and February 27 at Fearington Barn from 1 to 6 p.m. See www.chathamarts.org for details. Diane Bloom, who made "An Unlikely Friendship," a documentary being shown as part of the forum, will moderate a panel discussion during the weekend that includes Zucker, Hunt, Phoebe Zerwick, a Winston-Salem journalist who covered the Hunt case, and the Reverend Nelson Johnson, organizer of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The forum is a continuation of the ChathamArts' Sustainable Cinema Series.

Linda Booker, the forum's founder and project director and a filmmaker, said, "ChathamArts believes that art, and in this case film, as an expressive form, offers a powerful means for helping viewers imagine experiences outside their own and for lending catharsis to viewers who may see their own experiences mirrored in the stories these films tell. We hope the films we have programmed inform audiences about the importance of a historical understanding for these North Carolina stories, and the ways that popular culture can speak to the issues of race and justice that continue today. When paired with strong facilitators, film also offers a natural catalyst for open dialogue."

For Zucker, the open dialogue began as he was making his film. "The very first person I met and spent time with in Greensboro was Signe Waller Foxworth, who was central to the effort in 1979 and was widowed during the Greensboro Massacre. Signe was completely trusting of me, an outside media person, despite the fact that there had been much terrible and unfair coverage of her and others over the years. I continued to spend time with her each time I went to Greensboro and her support and faith never wavered. When the film was over she told me she learned new things each time she sees the film," Zucker said.

There have been many poignant interactions Zucker has had during the many screenings of his film, but one of the most touching for him was at the film's



Scenes from Adam Zucker's documentary film, "Greensboro: Closer to the Truth", include the Revolution Mill (bottom), and Virgil Griffin, then Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

premiere. It was held in Greensboro as part of the River Run Film Festival and about 400 people attended. "A young black boy, perhaps 11, whose parents had lived in Morningside Homes, the site of the murders, and whose family had been traumatized and never spoke to him about the attack, got up to ask a question. 'Mr. Zucker, do you think there will ever be an end to racism?' I handed the mike to Reverend Nelson Johnson, and while I can't remember exactly what he said, he was much wiser and more eloquent than I could ever be. But the fact that the boy could be so motivated and empowered to ask such a question speaks to the potential for film to motivate and frame issues," Zucker said.

With his film, Zucker was just trying to get a handle on the pulse of the city and paint a picture, capture a moment in time. He explained, "I never felt my mission or goal was to point fingers or portray Greensboro or any other place

in a particularly negative light. Greensboro is neither all good nor all bad. What happened in Greensboro in 1979 was an avoidable tragedy; what happened in 2004-2006 can hopefully be an inspiration to other communities. The film is about Greensboro, but it's also about everywhere. There are many places that have terrible scars in their past that they would rather not confront, but to be able to face the truth and make real efforts to move forward is hopefully an inspiration to all of us."

The first RACE in NC Film forum was held in March of 2009 and in February, 2010, the Chatham County Human Relations Commission honored this premier event with a Jerry L. Markatos Diversity in Media Award. The film forum project is made possible by a grant to ChathamArts from the North Carolina Humanities Council.

Deborah R. Meyer is a Chatham writer. She can be contacted at 919.942.3252.



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