



L-R: Aaliya Muhammad (project coordinator), Ira Blount, Beverly Lindsay-Johnson (producer) and Wanda Aikens (executive director) chat after the preliminary screening of "Ira Blount: The Common Threads that Bind."



Ira Blount proudly displays one of his quilts during filming of the documentary about his life and artwork.

Ward 7 Arts Collaborative Goes to the Movies!

BY DEIDRE R. GANTT

Two years ago, multitalented craftsman Ira Blount introduced himself to the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative Inc. Awestruck by his skill in basket weaving, quilting, leather and woodworking, tin punching, beading, needlepoint, origami and several other handcrafts, collaborative officers set out to raise the public's awareness of his contributions. Since then, Blount has received the collaborative's Nguzo Saba award, a proclamation from Ward 7 Councilmember Yvette Alexander and a cover story in this newspaper. But these accolades were just the beginning.

On Aug. 1, days before his 91st birthday, the collaborative will host the premiere of the documentary film, "Ira Blount: The Common Threads that Bind." Narrated by Lorna Newton, host of WHUR's "DC Inspirations," this 30-minute film uses a combination of video footage and photographs to chronicle Ira Blount's life, beginning with his childhood in

Memphis, Tenn., and progressing through his brief college education at Tuskegee Institute, enlistment in the army (which brought him to Washington and to Ward 7), ill-fated marriage to Louise Virginia Baker, and development as an artist, teacher and man of faith.

The premiere will be held at Asbury United Methodist Church (926 11th St. NW), where Blount has been a member since 1952. Aaliya Muhammad, the documentary's project coordinator and executive producer, selected Asbury for the debut "because the church is such a big part of his life, the church is featured in the documentary, and people from the church are featured in the documentary also."

One of his fellow church members praised Blount's generosity, noting that he has given artwork to numerous parishioners. "People can't imagine Asbury without Ira," said the Rev. Louis Shockley. Neigh-

bors and friends from his new home at the Carver 2000 Senior Mansion on East Capitol Street NE also appear in the documentary.

Although this is the first film project for both Muhammad and the collaborative, they hired a seasoned producer to ensure that the final product is both professional and compelling. Beverly Lindsay-Johnson, currently the lead producer for WHUT-32's "Evening Exchange with Kojo Nnamdi," has developed a number of documentaries about African-American history and culture, including the Emmy Award-winning "Dance Party: The Teenarama Story," which tells about a 1960's "American Bandstand"-style TV dance show for African-Americans teens in DC.

During a preliminary screening in June, Lindsay-Johnson explained her concept to Blount and collaborative board members: "I understand that everybody thinks he's this great, wonderful person and everything. But I can't believe that that was all his whole life. There's some challenge in his life, because we all have challenges. What are they? And did they help him to end up being the person that he is?"

After the screening, Blount thanked the producer for honestly portraying his life, including his struggles with alcohol and the breakup of his marriage. "I was glad that was included because I think that could be a lesson to other people of all ages," said Blount. "Being interested in creating things was really a strong force in turning my back on some of the bad habits that I had."

Collaborative Executive Director Wanda Aikens considers the film an opportunity to "inform and expand everybody's understanding of what Mr. Blount's life has been about and what the arts do. He's saying my life has been a trial and error, but he's also using art as a vehicle for substantiating who he is."

During the Aug. 1 premiere, attendees can purchase a copy of "Common Threads" DVD for \$10 or pick up a pre-ordered, autographed copy for \$15. (Note: Blount will not sign autographs during the premiere.) Subsequent screenings will be held at locations in Ward 7; the collaborative is also scheduling airtime for the documentary on DCTV.

To facilitate the educational impact of the documentary, copies of the DVD have been reserved for schools, libraries and nonprofits as well. Teachers can sign up to use the "Ira Blount Traveling Trunk," which contains a curriculum plan, educational materials and three interactive art projects related to the DVD and Blount's life.

Muhammad hopes that the documentary and the premiere will help the collaborative forge new relationships within the Washington, DC, arts community. "I want them to see that we're willing to expand into new things and into new venues and into new projects."

Collaborative Vice-Chair Saleem Hylton added, "I think this [project] has really set the stage for projects that we should undertake. It's like the pioneer for other documentaries of persons of great magnitude and accomplishment in our ward."

Major funding for the documentary came from the Humanities Council of Washington, DC. The documentary is also funded in part by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, an agency supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. Albert Shaheen, director of grants and special projects at the Humanities Council, was moved by the collaborative's desire to showcase the impact of Washingtonians at the community level, rather than focusing exclusively on those with national acclaim. "We hope the project raises awareness of figures like Ira Blount and that figures like this exist in Washington, DC, and in the neighborhoods, and maybe encourage people from other communities to find stories in their communities that they wish to tell," he said.

"I still am a little bit uncomfortable with the acclaim," said Blount. "It's something that I never expected to happen. I've done so many things that I enjoy doing, and then all of a sudden it's being recognized, and I'm very proud of that."

Tickets for the premiere of "Ira Blount: The Common Threads that Bind" can be purchased for a \$5 tax-deductible contribution by calling the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative, Inc. at 202-399-1997. Tickets are free for attendees ages 18 and younger. Pre-orders for autographed DVDs can be submitted online at www.w7aconline.org or by calling the collaborative office. ★

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