

## Digital Archives Unlocks Forgotten Stories

Entertainment Archive

BY EDITH BILLUPS - WI CONTRIBUTING WRITER

THURSDAY, JUNE 18, 2009

African American filmmaker and photographer Thomas Allen Harris wanted to create a space for African Americans to tell their own stories "because the African American representation has been so distorted in film and on television," he said.

Harris, 46, recently created the Digital Diaspora Family Reunion, a new media platform which taps into a vast network of Black photographic archives across the nation, bringing a fresh look at African American history and community.

Harris will introduce his new work at SilverDocs, the American Film Institute (AFI)/Discovery Channel Documentary Festival, being held through Mon., June 22 in Silver Spring, Md.

Born into a family of photographers, the award-winning filmmaker noted recently that, "We have people who have made it against the odds. These stories are resting on our mantle places, in boxes and in our closets. I want to talk about how we can use these stories to tell who we are as a people. When we tell these stories to the next generation, they can use these stories to make films, create stories, and write scripts based on their ancestors."

Harris' new approach to digital archives will be presented on Sat., June 20 at 1 p.m., at the AFI Silver Theatre 2. During his presentation, participants will learn more about the latest in Web 2.0 interactive tools for uploading and sharing and exploring Black family stories. They also will learn how they can share their stories and family photographs and be considered for possible use in Harris' new film about Black photography entitled, "Through a Lens Darkly." He will also screen clips of his award-winning films, "That's My Face" and "Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela," both inspired by his own family history.

SilverDocs presenters said Harris' "Through a Lens Darkly," when combined with Digital Diaspora, represents a new model of participatory documentary filmmaking where the public contributes content that unlocks hidden or forgotten histories.

"I am interested in building new territory and I really wanted to create something that would allow for people to have access and allow them to create their own media and put it in our site," Harris said.

"As African Americans, we have all of this stuff of value located in our own homes. For younger people who are not being taught certain things in classrooms, they don't have to rely on outdated textbooks. This provides an impetus to spend more time talking with each other about the stories in our families."

Other films of interest to people of color during the festival include "My Neighbor, My Killer," by Anne Aghion and "Mrs. Goundo's Daughter," by Barbara Attie and Janet Goldwater. "My Neighbor, My Killer" is about the post-Rwanda massacre and explores whether it is possible to live among people who slaughtered their neighbors.

"I was trying to see how people live together after something as cataclysmic as this happens," Aghion said. "I wanted people to realize that it is not a quick fix to rebuild after conflicts, and I hope the film will be the starting point for creating dialogue in a big way."

Attie and Goldwater's film is about a mother from Malawi who seeks asylum in Philadelphia on the grounds that if she is deported back to her country, her two-year-old daughter would be forced to undergo the genital-mutilation that she had to endure.

"In Malawi, this happens to 85 percent of the women. It is a poor education, and the education level is low. Things are changing, but we need to continue to act as a global community to protect women and girls," Goldwater said.

For more information on films and show times, visit [www.silverdocs.com](http://www.silverdocs.com).



Photographer Thomas Allen Harris is presenting his photographic documentary "Through a Lens Darkly" at the American Film Institute (AFI)/Discovery Channel Documentary Festival in Silver Spring, Md. **Courtesy photo by Ann Bennett**