

Cherokee Scout

Documentary asks, 'Who are my neighbors?'

Filmmaker travels area to dispel common myths

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Murphy – Ken Wyatt didn't know what to expect when he moved to North Carolina in 2006.

He had heard of names like Eric Robert Rudolf, once America's most wanted man, and Steve Anderson, a militant Aryan. Wyatt set out to find the truth about the western North Carolina mountains that hid such infamous men and the people who lived there. He did what he knew best to find those answers – he made a film about it.

An award-winning documentary filmmaker and media professor at East Carolina University, Wyatt said he had the idea to produce a documentary about the area by following the trail of Rudolf, who hid for five years within Murphy and the surrounding area. He was interested in the culture and mindset of those communities, which were given national attention through such heinous associations with racial and religious extremists.

"I wanted to know the truth," he said. "I like to do films about subjects people don't like to talk about."

Wyatt researched hate groups across the nation and the story of Rudolf's capture. His impression of the area was influenced by what he found and rumors of underground "right-wing extremists," fanatics who would protect a wanted murderer.

Beginning two years ago, he approached East Carolina University, bringing up the subject and collecting opinions of his colleagues. In 2007, he obtained the school's startup grant and additional funds to travel to Andrews, Asheville, Nanatahala and Murphy. Part travel documentary, part personal venture, he pursued the film with the intent to discover the identity of the area.

"As a media maker, my goal has always been to produce compelling edu-tainment," he said. "The medium is so powerful, and it's a tragedy that the rest of the country doesn't know what this place is like."

After setting his plan into motion, he organized a film crew. Some of the crew were his top students, others were hired help who set out to interview and ask questions of ordinary people in the western tip of the state. He said what he found opened his eyes and blew his mind.

The film began as an in-depth look into the environment of a killer and transitioned into a peek inside of a culture little known by the rest of the world. He interviewed the mayors of Andrews and Murphy, people on the street and families with their children eating at local restaurants. "Mountain folk" had a new meaning for Wyatt.

"People were extremely nice. Frankly, my thing was to find out what western North Carolina is really like and how people would treat me," he said.

The untitled documentary is nearing completion. Wyatt added that he has plans to submit his film for



Murphy Mayor Bill Hughes presents a painted pumpkin to filmmaker Ken Wyatt. Wyatt is doing a documentary on the people of western North Carolina.

screening at festivals across the state and possibly beyond, though he is quiet on the specifics.

"I will release this to festivals, but I don't like to name them. I don't want to jinx it," he said.

The film is scheduled to be completed and screened by summer.

"The project is 85 percent done," he said. "I might even return to Murphy again before it's over."

Wyatt has made a career out of exploring controversial topics that challenge society to show its true nature to the camera. He is familiar with the world of filmmaking and has won much acclaim in the documentary community.

As a black filmmaker, he gained attention and praise when he asked the question Nigger or Not? in his 2003 Athens (Ohio) Film Festival winner of the same title. He asked people, both black and white, about the use of the word by each race and the social consequences of those opinions. His work won him an honorable mention in the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame. He also has completed four other documentaries that explore prolific jazz figures.

Wyatt has molded his career out of a foundation in media production. He teaches in East Carolina University's communication department. His films have allowed him to travel the world, participating in events, conferences, and international film festivals. He said his documentary work is all a labor of love. Although he is a dedicated professor, the need to make films is a strong personal calling.