

ARTS

'Music by Prudence': An Oscar-Winning Labor of Love

West Orange resident Patrick Wright won an Academy Award in March for his work co-producing the short documentary, which premieres on HBO on May 12.

By **Joyce Kaffel** May 7, 2010

While he was surfing the Internet at 6 a.m. on Feb. 2, 2010, West Orange resident Patrick Wright found out that his short documentary, "Music by Prudence," (<http://www.musicbyprudence.com/>) was nominated for an Oscar. Wright co-produced the film with his colleague and friend Roger Ross Williams and also served as its associate editor. He immediately texted the good news to Williams. It was, understandably, impossible for him to focus for the rest of the day.

"Winning an Oscar is something I have always dreamed about, like getting married and having a wedding. But I really believed I would get married... the Oscar was a fantasy," Wright said. Yet his fantasy came true. The film will have its premier broadcast on HBO at 8 p.m. on May 12.

Wright, 43, is six feet tall with a head of prematurely white hair. His lively blue eyes are framed by Clark Kent-style glasses. He has an easygoing manner and a boyish appeal that likely makes his students at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), where he is Chair of the Video and Film Arts Department, look forward to attending his classes.



Before "Music By Prudence," Wright made films about socially relevant topics, including HIV/AIDS and clergy sexual abuse. "Prudence" deals with the issue of physical disability. In its 33 minutes, it gives a clear picture of the life of 21-year-old Zimbabwean musician, Prudence Mabhena. She is severely disabled from arthrogryposis, a congenital disorder that has caused severe joint deformities resulting in the loss of her legs and hardly any capability to use her arms. Despite her physical challenges, she has organized an Afro-fusion marimba band, "Liyana," with a group of other disabled young people.

The documentary pulls the audience into Prudence's world through her eloquence and the filmmaker's skilled direction as Prudence narrates how it feels to have her existence devalued by the people she holds most dear. She finds her self-worth through the love of her non-judgmental grandmother and the camaraderie of other handicapped students at the King George VI School & Centre for Children With Disabilities in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

Prudence's powerful, melodic voice and a talent for composing music enables her to have a sense of purpose, success, and most of all, hope, in a decaying, impoverished country. In a culture where disabled individuals are thought to have been touched by witchcraft and are frequently considered burdensome, Prudence and her band have made a place for themselves.

The "Prudence" project started, said Wright, when Elinor Burkett, with whom he had previously made a film, contacted him about the Liyana band. Burkett (infamously now known as the woman who caused a "Kanye West" moment (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/08/short-film-producer-elino_n_489893.html) at the Oscars when she interrupted Roger Ross Williams while he was giving his acceptance speech) was on a Fulbright in Zimbabwe where she saw the band perform and told Wright how phenomenal it was. She asked Williams, a television producer, director and writer, to work on the film with Wright. Williams and Burkett went to Zimbabwe a number of times without Wright accompanying them. "My wife made a rule that I couldn't travel to any failing country while we were having children," he said.

Although not at the film site, Wright made significant contributions to the making of "Prudence." MICA provided much needed seed money through Wright's efforts. He let the crew borrow his own equipment. Every trailer to fund and sell the film was made by him. As associate editor, he did a lot of grunt work for this labor of love.

Wright's former student, Errol Webber, is a cameraman whose work on the film has been praised. He was 21 when he went to Zimbabwe with Wright's encouragement. Webber was given plane fare and money for food and expenses, but had to move out of his apartment so he could take root in Zimbabwe for several months. "He took a huge risk, said Wright. "No, he doesn't owe me anything. He did something for me. My film won an Oscar."

The morning before the Oscars at the Writers Guild in Beverly Hills, the International Documentary Association screened all the short documentaries that were nominated. It was the first time Wright saw the film with an audience. "I really felt proud," he said. "The two and a half years was really worth it. The thing about making the film is that it's all about risk. That moment at the Writer's Guild was great because I could see how touched people were. The film is for Prudence. She has had an unimaginably hard life but is still so optimistic, creative and inspiring."

Wright's most memorable Oscar moment, besides the film industry honor, was walking into the Vanity Fair party shoulder to shoulder with Heidi Klum. "She's tall," he said, of the beauty. The Vanity Fair party is ultra-exclusive with invites for Oscar winners only or A-list celebrities. The "Prudence" group closed the party at 3 a.m. Wright compared his group's experience there to being in an episode of "Entourage."

By 6:30 a.m., Wright was on a Southwest Airlines flight on the way home to New Jersey. Seated between two heavyset, unglamorous men, he felt as though his star was falling. He knew the party was over when he was in South Orange's Farrell Field later on, wiping his kids' noses and giving them sippy cups.

His only regret of the whole experience was the awkward Burkett-Williams moment, which became fodder for the media. Though that instance has nothing to do with the film, the pinch of notoriety might be a bittersweet benefit enticing people to view it, he observed.

Wright, originally from Cincinnati, moved to West Orange from Baltimore four years ago. His wife, Betsy Barnes, is a researcher at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. They moved to West Orange because they were planning to start a family. West Orange was chosen for its proximity to the city and Amtrak, its public schools, and because it feels like the country to them.

"Coincidentally, it's the home of the motion picture and the Nickelodeon, which was invented by Thomas Edison," said Wright. Shortly after they moved here, Wright got involved with the West Orange Film Society. He became fast friends with his neighbor, Ken Mandel, who is the society's founder. Now they run it together.

Wright and his wife have three little children. The last one, Mabel, was born a month after the Oscars. This has surely been a stellar year for him.



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