

A SELF-PORTRAIT Film aims to paint Durham as a microcosm of America

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Durham's history has captivated Steven A. Channing for 20 years.

Now Channing wants to capture parts of Durham's history with a documentary and multimedia project by his media production company.

"Durham is a great place to make the point that history does matter," he said.

Channing is president of Video Dialog Inc. He detailed his proposal for "Durham: A Self-Portrait" and related projects Tuesday at the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce office.

A former history professor, Channing said the hourlong film will show the unique qualities of Durham and how the city's diversity and development are part of a larger, American picture.

"This place was an abandoned field 150 years ago," he said. "It was created by energy, by vision, by entrepreneurship. ...

"There was something different about Durham," Channing said.

"People flocked here from the country, Jews from the North, Germans from Europe," he said. "W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington came here because people said, 'You gotta go to Durham.' I want to focus on the creation, not exactly the disintegration and the reimagining of the city today."

This will be the first Durham-focused project for Video Dialog, which won a 1997 regional Emmy for its historical drama "Alamance." It likely will be

similar to Video Dialog's "February One" documentary, which combined archival materials, interviews and re-enactments.

Information distributed during the press conference highlighted Durham's tobacco heritage, its "Black Wall Street" on Parrish Street downtown, and its transformation into an internationally known medical and technology hub.

Channing hopes "Durham: A Self-Portrait" eventually will air on national public television. But he would like to have a local TV debut and a September 2006 screening to coincide with the annual Bull Durham Blues Festival.

Video Dialog already has interviewed public figures such as scholar John Hope Franklin and the late Charles Watts, founder of Lincoln Community Health Center.

The film also will include Durham's less-recognized citizens, such as surviving workers from the old Erwin Mills.

"I want to invite families all over Durham to think about that old box of photos in the attic or the old home movies," Channing added.

Information gathered for the project will be deposited in area archives.

Other parts of the \$500,000 project will include an illustrated book, educational videos geared to 8th-grade state history courses, a video for the Hayti Heritage Center, and a Web site (www.portraitofdurham.com) donated and designed by McKinney + Silver.

The Web site, set for a mid-February launch, will allow people to share historic materials.

Departing chamber president Tom White said the project is "about civic pride, appreciating your roots and history."

"I think it's going to inculcate this appreciation in our kids," White said. "We study U.S. history, international history. But it's a common phenomenon that you don't study the history of your local community."

"Also for those of us who are newcomers, [we can say] 'Oh, by the way, would you care to have a look at what's had bearing on making this community?'"

But Channing said the film isn't promotionalism, "a valentine for Durham."

Video Dialog will not accept money from city, county or other public sources, he said. But the project has attracted fiscal sponsorship from the Southern Documentary Fund, a \$200,000 matching challenge grant from Charlotte's Duke Endowment and corporate support.

Liggett Vector Brands Inc. is just one of the financial backers.

"We just think the project is important," said CEO Ronald J. Bernstein, who attended Tuesday's press conference. "When you look at Durham and other cities, what makes Durham so different is economic development. Tobacco played a role in that, and we're proud of the history."

Community members can contact Channing at schanning@videodialog.com.

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