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Demme's Tales of Ordinary Heroes in New Orleans

By [FELICIA R. LEE](#)

Victims and despair were what [Jonathan Demme](#) expected to find when he headed to New Orleans with his camera. Instead, he said, he discovered tough-minded heroes, who became the stars of his unadorned film "Right to Return: New Home Movies from the Lower Ninth Ward." Beginning tonight Tavis Smiley will turn over the entire week of his [PBS](#) program, "The Tavis Smiley Show," to broadcast parts of the film.

Mr. Smiley's 30-minute show will feature five roughly 20-minute episodes carved out as discrete appetizers from Mr. Demme's film. (On WNET In New York, Episodes 4 and 5 will be broadcast back to back on Thursday.) Mr. Demme said he planned to show the stitched-together episodes from Mr. Smiley's show, with additional material, at the Silverdocs: AFI/Discovery Channel Documentary Festival, a six-day international film festival in Silver Spring, Md., in June.

Mr. Demme, the Oscar-winning director and producer whose work includes "[The Silence of the Lambs](#)" and "[Philadelphia](#)," said he had enough material eventually to make a 10- to 15-hour documentary, with five seasonal chapters. "A memoir in the moment," is what he calls each story he has documented.

In "Right to Return" viewers get to know preachers, artists, single mothers, young professionals. Mostly these people talk: about rebuilding, dealing with the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#), about what their neighborhood was like and what was lost, existentially and literally, when the waters ravaged the city. They describe waiting for insurance money, electricians, debris removal, mail service.

"I just thought everyone who can point a camera in the right direction should go down there and point a camera in the right direction," Mr. Demme said in a recent interview about his trips to New Orleans. "This is the great American epic of our time.

"I had thought we would record the death throes of an obliterated culture. The culture was not obliterated. These are not tragic figures. These are the American heroes who've gone back into these damn neighborhoods."

Mr. Demme is the film's director and producer. His partners in the venture, Abdul Franklin and Daniel Wolff, are also producers. "Right to Return" has a home-movie, seat-of-the-pants feel. The assumption is that the viewer knows the big story and now can get a close-up view of smaller stories from the citizens of New Orleans.

"We had two cameras," recalled Mr. Wolff, a writer and film producer. "We got in a rented car and just drove. There was no script. There were no written questions."

The week of "Right to Return" on Mr. Smiley's show begins with an episode filmed in winter 2006 and ends with one from winter 2007. Each episode concludes with an update from the people interviewed. Although

the camera lingers on neighborhoods full of waterlogged debris and gutted and disarrayed houses, “Right to Return” focuses on the people and not the physical destruction.

One recurring figure is the Rev. Melvin Jones, known as Pastor Mel, first seen in the winter of 2006 playing cheerleader to a room full of sad-eyed men by reminding them of the people they plucked from the water. His own story is that he overcame drug abuse and homelessness to become pastor of Bethel Community Baptist Church in the Ninth Ward, which has a program for male substance abusers. Pastor Mel lost his house and his church but is rebuilding both. He wants others to stay and fight too, he says.

“The answer is not the government taking the land and selling it to a developer for a sweetheart deal,” he says in the film, repeating rumors he has heard of government plans to transform mostly black New Orleans into what he calls a “boutique city” for tourists.

The spring 2006 segment features Herreast Harrison, the widow of Donald Harrison Sr., who was the Big Chief of a Mardi Gras Indian tribe known as the Guardians of the Flame. She is also the mother of the jazz saxophonist Donald Harrison Jr. and the grandmother of young trumpeter Christian Scott. Every year the Guardians of the Flame would dress up and sing in the streets of New Orleans.

Mrs. Harrison, an educator, talks about saving a few Mardi Gras costumes but losing so much when her home of 40 years was destroyed. In the film she fingers a feathered headdress from Mardi Gras.

“When they masqueraded in the neighborhood, they brought beauty and eloquence,” she says, explaining that the tribe’s music and manner transmitted a culture that mingled African and American Indian elements.

Her daughter, Cherice Harrison-Nelson, talks about being an artist who helps schoolchildren use art to cope with the dislocation of the storm, despite, she says, being told by FEMA that she should relocate to Houston. She has lived in a series of hotels, she says.

Carolyn S. Parker, filmed last summer, talks about trying to lure her neighbors back to the city. But her son, Rahsaan M. Parker, declares, “You wouldn’t be able to survive 18 hours the way we’re living down here.”

Mrs. Parker cheerfully notes the irregular mail service and says her only wish is to be back in her home by Christmas. She has been slowly rebuilding her house but is still in a trailer.

“Right to Return” ended up on television by happenstance. Mr. Demme said he was working on his documentary about [Jimmy Carter](#) when his path crossed Mr. Smiley’s. After hearing about Mr. Demme’s project and looking at the footage, Mr. Demme said, Mr. Smiley gave him the gift of airtime. Mr. Smiley said that it was the first time he had done such a thing and that his gesture was compelled by the power of Mr. Demme’s film and by the plight of New Orleans.

“The media descended on New Orleans for the Katrina story, but the real struggle is asserting the right to return,” said Mr. Smiley, who has made a name for himself in broadcasting but also as a player in black arts and politics. “This is a story that for five consecutive nights tells what people have gone through.”

Mr. Demme’s film would seem to invite comparison with [Spike Lee’s](#) 2006 documentary, [“When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts,”](#) but Mr. Demme sees his project as picking up where Mr. Lee’s ended. Unlike Mr. Lee’s critically acclaimed four-hour film “Right to Return” stays away from experts, hurricane

scenes and shots of bedraggled storm victims.

Pastor Mel, for one, said he was hopeful that the combination of Mr. Demme's artistic imprimatur and Mr. Smiley's journalistic and political bona fides would spur action on behalf of the city.

"We're Americans here, not just New Orleans residents," he said in a telephone interview. "We're just normal, everyday working people doing what we're supposed to be doing, and things like the Internet are not back, the lights are not back, the telephones are not back, the sewers and the streets are deplorable. It's all God helping us."

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