

# The Washington Times

WASHINGTON, D.C., MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1994 \*\*

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## Anacostia students help direct a movie

By Lisa Nevans  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Chaquina Lee didn't really know she would be making a movie when she signed up for a Saturday program with 13 other Anacostia High School students this year. She just hoped to improve her writing.

But when the credits rolled on the movie "Poppy" yesterday at the American Film Institute, Chaquina's name was one of seven listed as an assistant director.

The 26-minute film was the brainchild of American University screenwriting professor, Allison Silberberg, who wanted to tap into inner-city high school students' interest in movies. The result was a Saturday morning program, dubbed "Lights, Camera, Action!" that culminated in yesterday's movie screening.

"This became a lot more than what I expected," said Robby Preston, 16, an assistant director/singer/actor/sound-and-lighting man on the movie. "I never expected a reporter to come up to me, and I never expected to be at the Kennedy Center."

Ms. Silberberg has talked to Robert Redford's Sundance Institute about showing the film there and the Public Broadcast-

ing Service may air "Poppy" and a 20-minute documentary about its creation.

Not bad for a program that was founded in January and financed on a Visa card, said Ms. Silberberg.

"Everyone said it takes at least two years to start something like this and it takes tons of money," she said at a post-screening cast party at Planet Hollywood. "They said other programs exist where the kids get paid, and you're not offering them money or school credit. There was a lot of naysaying."

But she decided to go for it, something she repeatedly encouraged "her" kids to do in the four months they spent pitching scripts, critiquing films, writing, costuming and otherwise making their movie.

School officials were enthusiastic and Metropolitan Police in the 7th District offered use of their community room when the school could not afford to open its doors on Saturdays. Businesses donated supplies and services and the project won a \$4,500 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts this spring.

"Poppy" is the story of a man who has raised his grandson, Rayvon, and wants to see the boy become the first in the family to

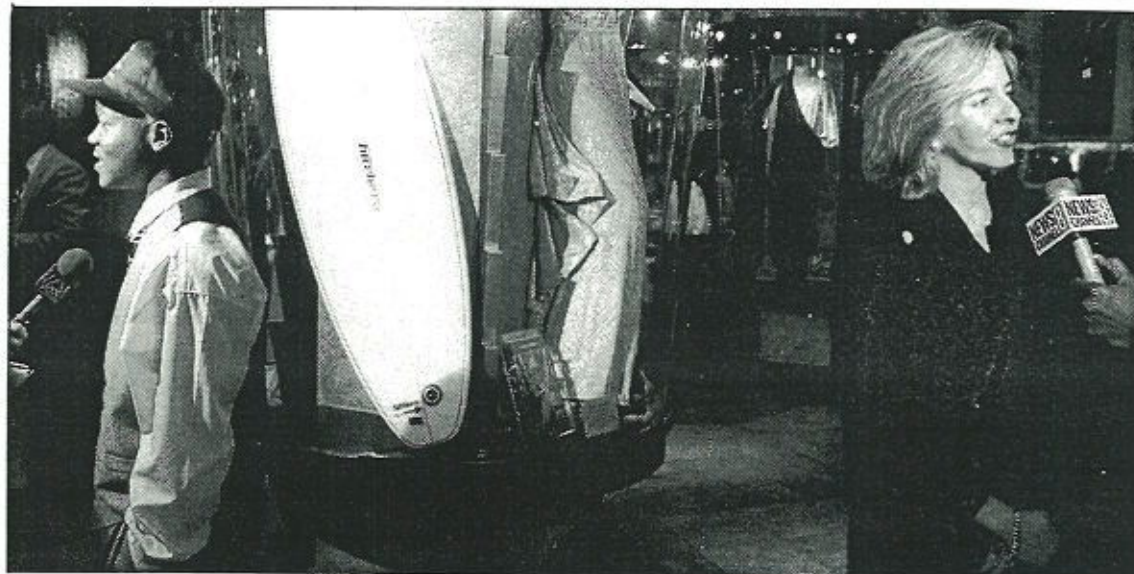


Photo by Kenneth Lambert/The Washington Times

Robby Preston and Allison Silberberg answer questions about "Poppy" at a party at Planet Hollywood.

go to college. But when Poppy dies, Rayvon — played by Rayvon Hicks — stops going to school, quits the basketball team and sits at home in the dark, while his friends worry about him.

The movie was filmed in Anacostia. The neighborhood — from rows of yellow school lockers to the brick row house of James "Duke" Jackson, who

played Poppy, to the "Sho-Nuf" Barber Shop — plays a featured role, with no evidence of the crime and drugs so present in most depictions of Anacostia.

Students said they didn't set out to paint Anacostia pretty, they just tried to portray the area as they know it.

"Everyone in Anacostia isn't thugs and thieves. A majority of the students want to do some-

thing positive with their lives," said Robby, who hopes to go to college and study drama, literature and filmmaking.

The 14 students chosen for the program were average students, Ms. Silberberg said, neither honor roll stars nor "at risk" youths. Half dropped out because of the time commitment — three hours every Saturday morning.