

Recovery, In Another's Eyes

Oral Histories, Tiny Cameras, Microphones Chronicle the Healing Process

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The makeshift memorials of hand-lettered signs and flowers are long gone. The fire-scarred walls of the Pentagon have been rebuilt. But local residents still make pilgrimages to Fort Albany Park off Arlington Ridge Road, which is as close to the Pentagon as many Arlingtonians could go in the hours after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

On a recent sunny afternoon, two such pilgrims stood on the crest of the hill, looking out over the tiny scrap of park and the busy lanes of Interstate 395 toward the hazy Pentagon and Washington Monument beyond. One was Arlington historian Kathryn Holt Springston, who, in the two years since Sept. 11, 2001, has tried to preserve the county's experiences through oral histories of county residents.

Nearby, Boston filmmaker Liz Canner readied her equipment. Canner spent the summer in Arlington filming "Moving Visions," an unusual digital public art project that is to debut Saturday at the county's commemorative concert at the Iwo Jima Memorial. It documents daily life in Arlington through the eyes of eight people, many of whom suffered in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Two years after the cataclysmic event, she discovered lives that are sometimes poignant, sometimes mundane.

"Arlington has gone back to its day-to-day routines," said Springston, 51.

Canner chose to follow such well-known figures as County Board Chairman Paul Ferguson and Fire Battalion Chief Raymond Blankenship, one of the first officers on the scene at the Pentagon that day. But she also worked with Rene Rivera, a homeless day laborer who lived under a bridge along Four Mile Run, and Sharifa Al-Khateeb, president of the North American Council for Muslim Women.

"Basically, the idea is to have a better understanding of how people are living post 9/11 and what's changed for us as a nation," said Canner, 35, "and to also start to think and start to look critically at issues of freedom."

Sitting on the park bench, Canner rolled black electrical tape around a pair of clear eyeglasses, securing a tiny microphone and an even tinier camera connected to a cord snaking out of a nylon bag that held the actual digital video recorder. Participants in the film donned these "Wearcams," specially designed for Canner by a Harvard University physicist, as soon as they awoke in the morning and, for the most part, kept them on until they went to bed that evening.

Many participants said they found the unusual cameras distracting, but Marshawn Evans, 24, said she eventually warmed to the contraption. A Georgetown University law student

and motivational speaker, she spent her day at law school and meeting with officials of the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Home to discuss teaching a class there.

"I was picking up intricacies of individuals I wouldn't have noticed before," Evans said. "I felt almost like I was the camera, in a sense."

Springston was reluctant at first but gamely donned the camera while working on oral histories with several Arlington firefighters and Richard Clarke, an Arlington resident, cybersecurity expert and former national coordinator for counterterrorism in the current Bush administration.

Norma Kaplan, chief of the Arlington County Cultural Affairs Division, first met Canner at a public art conference three years ago. Impressed with her work, Kaplan asked Canner to come to Arlington to discuss collaborating on a project soon after Sept. 11, 2001. Canner later secured funding for the film, grants of \$25,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts and \$5,000 from the Virginia Commission for the Arts.

Canner had already done a similar "Wearcam" project in Boston called "Symphony of a City." Her films have been shown at the Museum of Fine Arts and Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the New York Film Festival.

Ferguson agreed to be in the film because he thought that the subject was an important one. Wearing the cumbersome glasses through a series of constituent meetings, with his kids at the pool and while walking his dog, Buddy, "was strange," he said. "I didn't realize how extensive and how difficult it was going to be to wear the glasses all day."

Ferguson's contributions may lack drama, he warned.

"What it showed was an average day for me," Ferguson said. "Really, Arlington County is back to normal, although all of us still live with the memory."

Some of the film's most affecting moments occur when Canner followed those whose lives remain profoundly changed.

In the film, Rivera's day begins as he awakens under the bridge and brushes his teeth in Four Mile Run, then goes to a spot where day laborers gather in Shirlington to find work. Rivera, who has since moved to Michigan to seek work, became homeless when he lost a full-time job in the economic slowdown that followed the terrorist attacks. He said he hasn't seen his children in Guatemala in three years.

In another scene, Al-Khateeb gets a telephone call from her panicked daughter and learns that a Muslim friend had been picked up and detained by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The mix of such poignant detail with daily life is key in capturing truth about survivors,

said Barry Amundson, 33, a graphic artist whose brother, Army specialist Craig Amundson, died at the Pentagon. "I think we have so much of our reality packaged up for us. Being able to do this and see day-to-day interactions for people is hopefully closer to reality, something else for discussion and pondering."

Amundson, a peace activist, is one of few participants in the film who is not from Arlington, though his brother is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Excerpts from "Moving Visions" are to be shown from 6 to 10 p.m. Saturday at the Netherlands Carillon, next to the Iwo Jima Memorial, during the county's world music concert featuring the Kronos Quartet. The video will play throughout the day Sept. 26-28 at Cosi at 2050 Wilson Blvd., and on the side of the Cineplex Odeon 7 movie theater in Shirlington.

Canner had hoped to show the videos on the large wall on the I-395 overpass across from the Pentagon City Mall, but the Department of Defense nixed that idea.

Still, Kaplan said she hopes the art project will provoke dialogue for passersby who stop and listen to the tales. At times, the screens will show four stories simultaneously in an enormous grid on the wall. Observers can walk among four standing speakers to hear the different voices.

"It's a very public venue," Kaplan said. "Some people will choose to come, and others will just happen to stop and listen to four lives at once. We hope it will provoke a lot of interchange and comments. It's a public way to bring issues that affect all of us into the open."

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