

The View From/ New Haven

A Filmmaker Unearths Stories of the Struggle for Civil Rights

By ALIX BOYLE

KARYL K. EVANS, an independent filmmaker, specializes in bringing little-known histories to life. In 1995, she produced and directed a documentary on the Amistad revolt, two years before the Hollywood version was released and well before "Amistad" was a household word. Her latest effort is called "African Americans in Connecticut: Civil War to Civil Rights," a documentary whose premiere was last month on Connecticut Public Television and which will be televised again in August.

"These are incredible stories and it's an honor for me to be able to tell them," said Ms. Evans, who lives in New Haven with her 6-year-old son. "I'm so grateful that people let me into their lives. So little of this history is mentioned anywhere."

In making "Civil War to Civil Rights," Ms. Evans talked to 45 people. Many are African-Americans who spoke eloquently about their struggle for equality. Others are white people who witnessed the fight, like William Sloane Coffin, a former Yale chaplain who took groups of students to freedom rides in the South in the 1960's.

There are also interviews with renowned figures: Lloyd Richard, theater director and former dean of the Yale School of Drama, the jazz musician Willie Ruff and Constance Baker Motley, a New Haven native who was the first African-American woman to become a federal judge.

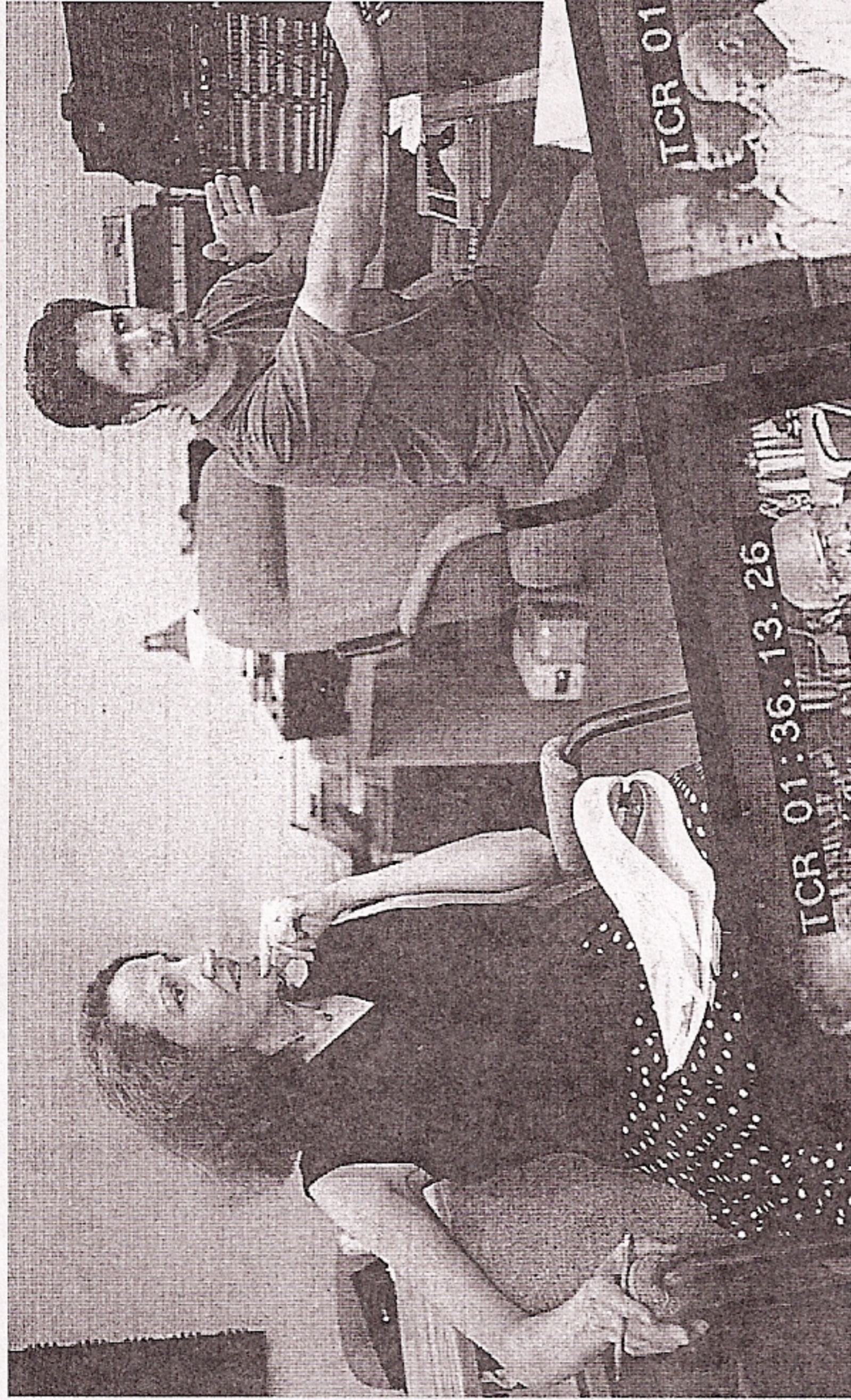
Then there are everyday people who did extraordinary things. Ms. Evans was particularly touched by the story of Warren Stewart, a World War II veteran and skilled electrician who was kept out of the union because of his race.

"It was just pure racism," she said. "How can you justify a man who was willing to die for his country and then when he returns home is not treated as an equal citizen?" Mr. Stewart appealed the union's decision repeatedly to the Connecticut Inter-Racial Commission, a precursor to the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. He eventually won the right to belong to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 35 and became one of its most popular foremen. He is retired now and lives in Bloomfield.

Viewers will also learn that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spent time in Connecticut working on a tobacco farm in his summers off from Morehouse College. It was here that he got his first glimpses of a society that had more opportunities for African-Americans than his native Georgia did.

In her research, Ms. Evans also found compelling evidence that the Connecticut artist Charles Ethan Porter was not permitted to exhibit his paintings in the 1893 World's Fair because he was black.

Another little-known story brought to



light: Johnny Taylor of Hartford might have become the first African-American to be signed to play organized professional baseball in this century, according to his wife, Estelle Taylor. In the 1930's, she said, the Yankees asked him to say he was Cuban instead of black, but he refused and was not allowed to play. He was also one of the first black players to be permitted to pitch in a high school game. The documentary is a joint venture of Connecticut Public Television and the Connecticut Humanities Council. Ms. Evans worked with the historians Jeremy Brecher and Frank Mitchell, who wrote the script with her. Ms. Evans researched her topic in the Library of Congress and in Connecticut libraries and historical societies and found more than 300 photographs that would be used in the film, which took about a year and a half to complete. She also found letters and diaries

Karyl K. Evans, a filmmaker, and Jeff Jacoby worked on a documentary, "African Americans in Connecticut: Civil War to Civil Rights." Images from the film include interviews with Fitzroy Parkinson, far left, and Sidney Barnett, Jamaican immigrants who worked in Connecticut tobacco fields.



Thomas McDonald for The New York Times

vision, said that Ms. Evans's work was important because many people did not realize the ethnic diversity of the state.

"She has a wonderful, positive energy and her work is a marriage of historical perspective and engaging television," Mr. Rifkin said. "That's a gift."

Compelling stories and the fact that no one was telling them attracted Ms. Evans to African-American history in the first place, she said. "I have a sense of pride about contributing to our history and way of life," she said. "It's all of our history, these stories affect us all."

"African Americans in Connecticut: Civil War to Civil Rights" will be shown on CPTV today at 5 p.m.

ple can use it to tour the sites, such as the grave of Venture Smith, a slave who bought his freedom in the 1700's and settled in the Haddam area. Later, she made a video about the trail, "The Road to Freedom," and won a regional Emmy award for directing it.

Last year, Ms. Evans produced "African Americans in Connecticut: The Colonial Era to the Civil War," narrated by the actor Ossie Davis, for which she won a Cine Golden Eagle award. She plans a third installment about the experience of African-Americans in Connecticut cities.

Larry Rifkin, executive vice president for programming for Connecticut Public Tele-

written by African-Americans and hired actors to read them for the film. The actress Ruby Dee is the narrator.

"Civil War to Civil Rights" is one of a half-dozen projects on African-Americans that Ms. Evans, who is white, has been involved with. She also developed a pamphlet on sites around the state that are significant in black history.

The pamphlet evolved into four audio tapes and a companion booklet on Connecticut's African-American freedom trail. Peo-

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