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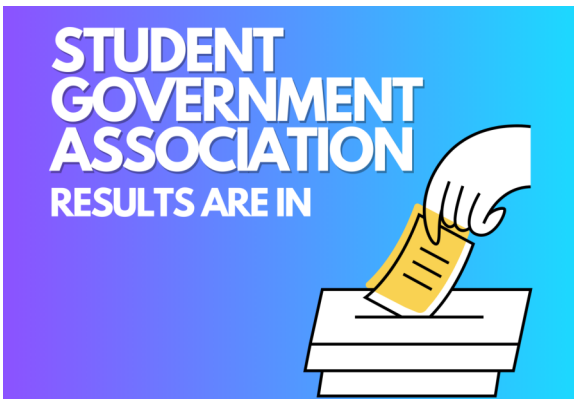
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Photo: [Beacon Archives](#)

Anna Feder at the Bright Lights Film Series in 2019.

By [Dionna Santucci](#)  
October 14, 2021

Bright Lights Film kicked off its fall 2021 series on Wednesday, Sept. 22 with the documentary “On These Grounds.”

The film was created by three alumni, Garret Zevgetis ‘05, Kevin Bright ‘76, and Christopher Dawkins ‘16, who banded together with North Carolina’s activists, geographers, and sheriffs to “expose over-policing in schools.”

The Bright Lights Film Series—sponsored by Emerson’s Department of Visual and Media Arts—seeks to engage the Emerson community and the greater Boston area in conversations with visual media-related events. These events screen faculty, student, and alumni work, which are followed by discussions and lectures given by experts in the field.

“At the heart of it, it’s an academic film series with a conversation afterward... the conversations are really more about the subject of the films,” the series’ curator, Anna Feder, said in an interview.

“On These Grounds” takes a deep dive into the troubling history behind South Carolina’s “disturbing schools” law, and the current fight to get policing out of schools after a disturbing video showing police brutality went viral. The documentary captures the reverberating tension that follows those who were involved in the video: South Carolina Spring Valley High School students Shakara Murphy and Niya Kenny, alongside activist and founder of Every Black Girl, Inc., Vivian Anderson.

The [viral video](#), from October 2015, shows Murphy, an African American student, sitting in her math class when a White school resource officer, Ben Fields, forcibly removes Murphy from her desk, throwing her across the classroom and kneeling on her. The assault was caught on camera and garnered both national and international attention.

Anderson was in Brooklyn when she learned of Murphy’s assault. A member of Black Lives Matter’s New York City chapter, Anderson felt that the right thing for her to do was purchase a one-way ticket to Columbia, S. C., and do whatever she could to bring attention to the situation. It was there that she founded “[EveryBlackGirl, Inc.](#),” a company that is “committed to creating a world where #EveryBlackGirl can thrive.”

Feder hopes that “On These Grounds,” like many of the series’ screenings, illuminates a social justice issue for viewers.

“[The documentary] is a very clear example of how bringing police into schools is a fast track to traumatizing students of color,” Feder said.

Zevgetis, who directed the film, discovered the video after the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against South Carolina. The suit was filed after Kenny, also African American was charged with “disturbing schools” and held in an adult detention center for coming to Murphy’s defense and not complying with Fields’ orders to sit down.

“I thought the safest place in the world was a school desk, but apparently now it’s not,” Zevgetis said in a webinar discussion Thursday night.

South Carolina’s “disturbing schools” law was the only one of its kind in the United States. Derived from an anti-flirting law the state put in place in 1919, “Disturbing Schools” was a criminal charge brought against students who “disturb schools in any way.” As of May 17, 2018, the crime of disturbing schools for students in the state of South Carolina has been repealed.

“On These Grounds” features interviews spliced together with stunning clips of South Carolina’s landscapes, as the natural background noise plays quietly underneath the film’s soundtrack. The film dives into an in-depth analysis of the history of South Carolina’s land with the expertise of geographers such as Jenae Davis.

The discussions are based on the idea that land can hold trauma, meaning that the history of the land can often reflect current issues. These discussions add a unique element to the documentary and sets it apart from other social justice films.

Dawkins, the film’s cinematographer, used natural lighting throughout the film to add a subtle, yet poignant touch. With shots of subjects that bring life to the documentary, Dawkins’ style of filming immerses the viewer into the heavy topics discussed in the film. This is illustrated when Anderson stands in a friend’s kitchen, brought to tears from reflecting on her past experiences with abuse and the education system failing her.

Dawkins’ ability to capture raw emotion, even in the simplest of gestures, demonstrates how “On These Grounds” brings down the barriers between viewers, crew, collaborators, and producers. The documentary is set up in a way that establishes a connection between audience member and collaborator, constantly grabbing the attention of viewers for key points of the film.

“[Filming] is about being present and feeling people’s hearts,” Dawkins said in the webinar.

A conversation between Fields, a disgraced school resource officer, and Anderson at the halfway point in the documentary is especially striking because of Dawkins’ ability to capture the tension in the room. In a wide shot of a table in front of a bright dining room window, Anderson and Fields are alone and facing each other at opposite ends. The frustration from both parties is palpable, to the point where the viewer is a part of the conversation.

By creating a space where activists like Anderson have a platform to share their thoughts, both with a wider audience and an individual from the opposing side, “On These Grounds” educates and facilitates civil dialogue among viewers.

“If those conversations aren’t had, then where do we go from there,” Anderson said in the documentary.

Feder explained why it was so important to show Field’s perspective through the conversation between him and Anderson—a choice she said humanized the former school resource officer.

“It’s really important to see him both as a person and part of a system,” Feder said. “If he’s a ‘monster’ then it’s this idea of a ‘bad apple’... and it absolves the larger structure.”

With consistent questioning and storytelling, “On These Grounds” captures both sides of a narrative while simultaneously holding harmful or untrue rhetoric accountable. Zevgetis and Executive Producer Bright’s decision to gain multiple perspectives from varying and different sources allowed counterpoints to stop the spread of misinformation.

Anderson’s ideas on school resource officer reform and the school-to-prison pipeline were ahead of their time. Many of her sentiments were shared at the Black Lives Matter protests that occurred over the summer of 2020, another topic that was mentioned towards the end of the documentary.

“I’m not saying kids don’t get to be held accountable. All we’re saying is ‘what does that accountability look like?’” Anderson said in the documentary. “We should not have a law where kids are being arrested for things they can’t get arrested for outside in the streets.”

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