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MIAMI SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

# Documentary focuses on historic Overtown

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When David Weintraub moved to Miami to work as a civil rights lawyer in a downtown skyscraper, he collected plenty of tips about the town, among them: Stay away from certain areas.

That included Overtown. But Weintraub's curiosity was piqued by a roadside plaque that declared the downtown neighborhood bisected by I-95 a historic landmark, and he began to poke around. More than a decade later, that poking turned serious.

Now a documentary filmmaker in North Carolina who devotes his off hours to cultural preservation, Weintraub returned to Overtown to give the neighborhood its due.

"The stories that are told about Miami are always about Flagler and Julia Tuttle and the orange blossom and the railroad coming south," he says. "But there are these invisible stories that need to be told about people who played an integral role in building the city. They were the ones who cleared the swamp and lay the railroad tracks and built the hotels. They lived in what is now Overtown."

Weintraub tells some of these invisible stories in

The Golden Side of the Tracks, which premieres Saturday at the Miami Short Film Festival. The documentary chronicles the history of Overtown — once called Colored Town — from its founding to the present. It is the tale of a community shaped by racism, greed, development, expressway construction and urban renewal.

Using vintage footage and photographs interspersed with interviews of present-day residents, activists and historians including Marvin Dunn and Paul George, Weintraub raises questions about the price of progress. It's the same technique he used in his first film, *Where Neon Goes to Die*, about Yiddish cultural legacy in Miami Beach.

After working on *Neon*, which debuted on WPBTPBS 2 in 2007, Weintraub saw parallels between what happened to the Jews on South Beach and to African Americans in Overtown. In both cases, tens of thousands of residents were displaced as development steamrolled their homes, obliterating chunks of history.

Telling Overtown's story in film was no easy matter. There were few tangible remnants of the community once known as the Harlem of the South, and paying for the right to use sparse archival footage ate into Weintraub's budget. Nonetheless, he says he discovered an extraordinary community that thrived despite its forced ghettoization.

Before freeway construction ripped through its heart in the 1960s, Colored Town was a thriving commercial center, home to seven newspapers, a dozen community organizations and countless professional offices and churches. Northwest Second Avenue, nicknamed Little Broadway, was home to venues including the Rockland Palace, the Harlem Square Club and the now-restored Lyric Theatre that presented some of the biggest names in entertainment — stars like Ray Charles, Nat King Cole and Count Basie who performed in Miami Beach but couldn't stay there because of the color of their skin.

"It made me think, if I was encircled with that kind of hate and what would seem total hopelessness and helplessness, how would I react?" Weintraub says. "I'm not sure I would've been able to do what those people did."

What surprised the filmmaker most during his research was "the amount of hate directed at Overtown. The Ku Klux Klan practiced a pattern of terror and the police didn't really step in. Sometimes they became the perpetrators."

Overtown, however, is far from dead, though it's facing new challenges, Weintraub says. The most recent building boom and bust have left a ring of half empty high-rises around the community, but most are beyond the economic reach of residents. Broken promises by developers and politicians have exacerbated the lack of affordable housing, he says.

Weintraub hopes his documentary will inspire viewers, including local civic leaders, to look at the old neighborhood in a new

way.

“When we’re talking about preservation, we need to talk not just about buildings but also about residents,” he says. “I’m hoping people will get better organized and they won’t let what happened to Overtown back in the 1960s happen again.”

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OPENING DAY: David Weintraub’s *The Golden Side of the Tracks* premieres Saturday.