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A Journey into America's Racial Divide

In a thought-provoking and heartbreaking lecture, critically acclaimed documentary filmmaker David Wilson recounts exploring his family's history of slavery



April 3, 2014 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – While the original “doll test” was conducted 64 years ago – illuminating the heart-wrenching fact that young children of color regarded themselves as having no value, particularly compared to a white child – that same experiment performed only four years ago in the groundbreaking documentary film, “Meeting David Wilson,” demonstrates how little has changed about the black community’s self-perception since the Jim Crow era.

Again and again in the film, the young black children chose the black doll as “bad,” while the white doll was “good” and the representation of who they preferred to be.

The inability of these contemporary children to establish self-worth was the most emotionally challenging part of filming an already contentious issue on how to open a dialog about America’s racial dilemmas, said the critically acclaimed director, David A. Wilson, whose documentary traced his family’s ancestry to a North Carolina plantation where his relatives were enslaved, and where he encountered a descendent of the slave master, a 62-year-old white man also named David Wilson.

It was also a sentiment that acutely resonated with Wilson. As a young boy growing up in 1980s Newark, N.J., “I felt that words like ‘poverty,’ ‘disease,’ ‘drugs’ and ‘violence’ were synonymous with the word ‘black,’” said Wilson, who recounted the journey of discovering his history in a President’s Distinguished Speakers Series event on April 1. “I certainly felt less than as a result, and I’ll be honest with you – as a kid, I hated being considered an African-American.”

The lecture featured clips from his documentary as Wilson connected the persisting racial problem to the country’s history of slavery and oppression – as well as to the unspoken racism that continues to reduce people of color to such narrowly defined roles of “poor,” “unemployed,” “single mother,” “drug dealers,” “thieves,” and “rapists.” It’s an image propagated by the national media and advanced by elements of black culture, he said.

“We need to be able to talk freely about race and dispel all the myths that are out there in order to move forward,” said Wilson, who is the founder and executive editor of theGrio.com, the first and largest video-based news portal dedicated to providing African-Americans the stories that appeal to them but are unavailable and underrepresented in national news outlets.

It became his life’s mission to uncover how society had been brought to this point, and to share how America can move forward via a productive discourse of the issue, he said. Wilson left his journalism job at CNN to embark on this journey, traveling to the coast of Ghana where he could feel the “undeniable presence” of the captive African women who were sold into slavery, visited the plantation that enslaved his ancestors, and spent an entire day pulling tobacco under the hot sun as his relatives were compelled to as slaves.

Wilson asserts that much of the black community’s self-esteem problem lies in the disconnect of heritage and identity – many don’t know their ancestors’ stories of triumph, of overcoming slavery and Jim Crowism; and they view their relatives as victims instead of “victors.” Children who don’t value themselves will fill their lives with meaningless materialism in order to validate themselves, or enter a life of crime believing they won’t be able to do any better, he said. And because of that, America feels the loss of neglected talent and genius that would have flourished if only someone had nurtured them, he added.

The way to improve this situation is through open and honest dialog between people of different races as well as among people of the same race, Wilson said.

“Our future together is far more important than our divided pasts.”