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‘Free Angela And All Political Prisoners’ Screens at UC Santa Barbara

If political activist Angela Davis were invited to address Congress tomorrow, she would encourage lawmakers in both Houses to forget about politicking and think deeply about real people's needs.

"My advice would be to consider what we need to do to make this country a place where its inhabitants can live and love and learn," she said in an interview at UC Santa Barbara's Pollock Theater. Davis was on campus Thursday evening for a screening of the film "Free Angela and All Political Prisoners," a documentary by Shola Lynch that chronicles Davis's life as a young, outspoken UCLA professor who in the late 1960s and early 1970s became a symbol of the fight for social justice.

The film centers on Davis's activism as well as her affiliation with the Communist Party and the Black Panthers, which led not only to her removal from the faculty at UCLA, but to her implication -- and subsequent trial and acquittal -- in the 1970 kidnapping attempt that resulted in the death of Superior Court Judge Harold Haley.

The film was followed by a question-and-answer period moderated by Gaye Theresa Johnson, associate professor of black studies at UCSB. Also participating in the discussion was the film's co-producer, Sidra Smith.

The "Free Angela" event was brought to campus by Sol Sisters Rising, a collective recently co-founded by Johnson, UCSB colleague Ingrid Banks, associate professor in the Department of Black Studies, and Kim Bluitt, a higher education and philanthropy professional. Sol Sisters Rising is dedicated to elevating the profile of women of color in films. Their goal is to create opportunities for recognition of and support for films that draw attention to the experiences of women of color.

"We have two facets of work, one of which involves programs like this screening, which is our inaugural event," said Johnson. "Already we'll be programming for the Santa Barbara International Film Festival and for Image Nation, a Harlem-based cinema café organization."

The second component of Sol Sisters Rising is a Web-based project that, according to Johnson, is the first of its kind. It consists of a complete catalog of films that in some way involve women of color, either as directors, producers or providers of content.

"There are a handful of festivals devoted to women of color in film, and there are several independent blogs and a number of Web sites that provide some kind of catalog, there is nothing as complete as what we're doing," Johnson explained.

To gather material, Johnson, Banks and Bluitt examined the last five years of programming from the top 10 film festivals in the world, matching a set of criteria they developed against recently released films. "We've come up with over 2,000 films just in the last five years," said Johnson. "And those are just the ones that have been selected. They include shorts, but they don't include all the incredible films that never make it to Sundance or Toronto or Cannes. We're talking about conscious content that presents women of color in their communities, and the social justice issues that affect them."

In conjunction with the catalog, the collective offers a searchable database -- also a first -- that contains thousands of films that have some connection to women of color. "There's a lot of opportunity here for us to build a sort of repository, but also to think about being an aggregator of women of color films," Johnson noted.

The "Free Angela" screening was co-sponsored by UCSB's Carsey-Wolf Center, Department of Black Studies, Department of Feminist Studies and Division of Student Affairs. "We thought it would be amazing for our first event," said Johnson. "And having Angela Davis come was like a dream come true. The work she's done has been so valuable to those people thinking about freedom and social justice. She's been paradigm shifting."

Davis supports the film as, among other things, a valuable teaching tool. "It's a film about a different era, an era that young people only know through their history books or films or perhaps stories that their parents or grandparents have told them," she said.

"It's the story about a victory that was achieved against all possible odds," she continued. "This was the reason I thought it might be important to record that story -- not so much because it focuses on me as an individual, but rather it's the story that in the end was victorious as a result of people coming together across all kinds of dividing lines: racial boundaries, national boundaries, ethnic, cultural. People all over the world joined the campaign to free me, and in the end, we won.

"Young people can perhaps be inspired by witnessing the unfolding of this story because there are so many social justice issues today that might begin to be resolved by building movements that are global in character," Davis said.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.