

# Local lesbian filmmaker says 'NO' to violence

By Jazmyn Burton  
PGN Contributor

Aishah Shahidah Simmons, founder of AfroLez Productions, has a story to tell: one of resistance, struggle and a pain that forces African-American women into silence and shame.

Although one in every three women will experience some form of sexual abuse during her lifetime, serious discussions about rape rarely make it into public discourse, Simmons said.

Using film as her medium, Simmons set out to expose the untold stories of African-American women who have suffered from sexual abuse at the hands of boyfriends, peers, family members and others they once trusted.

The finished product, a 94-minute documentary titled "NO!" explores rape within the African-American community and the ways in which black women affected by violence are learning to heal from the trauma of sexual assault.

Starting with the enslavement of Africans in America and working its way to the pervasive misogyny of hip-hop videos, "NO!" puts the rape of black women in a social and historical context and sheds light on stories of survival that often go untold.

The child of parents who made social activism their life's mission, Simmons believes

it was her destiny to become a "black feminist, lesbian activist who uses her art to promote cultural change."

"Film and video are extensions of my activism," the 37-year-old Philadelphia native said. "I have been tremendously influenced by black women writers and filmmakers and I wanted to be a part of the continuum that makes visible all that is invisible about a black woman's experiences."

More than a decade in the making, the seeds that blossomed into "NO!" were planted in 1994 when Simmons and her close friend Tamara L. Xavier had their first pre-production meeting on a SEPTA commuter train.

Since then the film has been screened across the United States,

Canada and Europe. Recently, Simmons received a grant from the Ford Foundation that will enable her to make her film accessible to a global market by reproducing "NO!" in Spanish and French.

"To date, at each screening at least one woman or girl has disclosed to me personally or to the entire 'NO!' viewing audience that she has experienced some form of sexual violence," she said.

The film received critical acclaim during the annual Festival Internazionale di Cinemae Donne in Florence, Italy, one of the longest-running international women's film festivals, and has screened on several college campuses.

However, there are two sides to the growing popularity of "NO!" Audiences who may not have taken

the flip side of the coin is the racist notion that there aren't any black gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people." Simmons acknowledges that powerful African-American feminists and scholars paved the way for her work. And, although

her fight to shed light on issues that affect marginalized segments of our community is an uphill battle, she is grateful that her work is beginning to reach a broad audience.

"It's been a long time," she said. "I feel like the harvest of my work is finally coming." ■



**VOCAL LESBIAN:** Aishah Shahidah Simmons presents a keynote address during the Womb to Womanhood Conference at 9 a.m., Saturday in Anderson Hall, Temple University, 1114 Berks St., followed by a screening of her film "No!"

her work seriously in the past because of her sexuality are beginning to accept her work and disregard her sexual identity.

"Because the film deals with heterosexual rape, I find that people are starting to accept 'NO!' and ignore my sexuality," Simmons said. "It's almost as if I've become invisible as a lesbian."

Keeping her sexual identity in the forefront has been an important aspect of Simmons' work. She named her company "AfroLez Productions" as an acknowledgement that her dedication to issues that affect the African-American community and her sexuality can coexist.

"There's this homophobic notion that if you're lesbian, gay, bisexual

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