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 Tonight's Top Stop: Aishah Shahidah Simmons

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THE D.C. RAPE CRISIS CENTER, one of the nation's first such [sexual assault resource centers](#), is sponsoring a screening of award-winning African-American feminist filmmaker and activist Aishah Shahidah Simmons' film **NO!** at Howard University tonight. Following the screening, Simmons, herself a sexual assault survivor, and Lori Robinson, [the author of "I Will Survive: The African-American Guide to Healing from Sexual Assault and Abuse"](#) will speak to the audience about sexual assault. Express spoke with Simmons yesterday.



» **EXPRESS:** What's your documentary about?

» **SIMMONS:** It's a documentary that looks at sexual violence and healing in African-American communities. Moving from the enslavement of African people through present-day, examining the intersection of race, gender and sexual orientation in the lives of black women, and girls, rape survivors. It is also a conversation between black women and men, scholar-activists, who have either done research or are doing activism to bring an end to this atrocity.

» **EXPRESS:** It took you 10 years to make the film, right?

» **SIMMONS:** 11 years. I started in '94 and I officially completed it in 2005. This year, I received a major grant from the [Ford Foundation](#) to support the international marketing and distribution. So it will soon be subtitled in French, Portuguese and Spanish, making it accessible in a global market.

» **EXPRESS:** You've called making the film "the result of a black feminist grassroots movement."

» **SIMMONS:** I'm definitely very grateful for the institutional support of Ford's, but it has taken 11 years — the result of economic censorship on the part of countless funders. So, as a result, I had to resort to alternative means of raising funds. From that came this international grassroots black feminist network that was multi-racial, but was black feminist-led.

» **EXPRESS:** What was that censorship like?

» **SIMMONS:** Receiving grant rejection letters that said "A woman shouldn't be in a man's room at 2 a.m." Breakfast meetings with programmers from major cable networks saying "Let's face it: Most people don't care about black women and girls."



» **EXPRESS:** What can white women get out of "NO!"?

» **SIMMONS:** Well, rape is an universal reality. I've screened the documentary for audiences where myself and the people in [the movie] are the only people of African descent — in Eastern Europe and I've just returned from Italy. "NO!" asks all people to look at this atrocity, through the experiences of black women, but it is

something that, regardless of race, if you've been impacted by it or know someone who's been impacted by it, you have a relationship to it, in the way in which I can easily relate to films that deal with violence against women when those women don't look like me.

» **EXPRESS:** Do you think there's a difference in the experiences of rape in African-American and white communities?

» **SIMMONS:** I think it's different, historically, in how the media responds to it, how the criminal justice system responds to it. Because of racism and sexism in this country, there's sort of this belief that black women are unrapeable. I've had screenings where I've had very earnest

and innocent young white women students saying, "Prior to your documentary, I didn't know black women could be raped." Black women, while they're also dealing with sexism, still have to confront the horrific reality of racism. So, I think that is the main difference, though I would offer that most women don't receive adequate support from the justice system, no matter what race.

» **EXPRESS:** Can one ever recover from rape?

» **SIMMONS:** I think that we're always recovering and always surviving. I think that you have a lesser chance of recovery if you're not getting any kind of therapeutic help, which is definitely something that many of us in the African-American community do not seek out.

» **EXPRESS:** When you're at screenings of your film, what are the most common questions people ask you?

» **SIMMONS:** I've yet to have a screening where there hasn't been at least one person who discloses that they've been raped or sexually assaulted. That's a constant thing — in Croatia, in Hungary, in Harlem, in Philadelphia. Because I'm out as a lesbian, I frequently have questions about "Is that why you're a lesbian?" and responded to the fact that based on the statistics of sexually assaulted women, more women would be lesbians, so rape doesn't make one a lesbian. A lot of times people are like "What can I do, what can we do, to end this problem?"

» **EXPRESS:** What can be done?

» **SIMMONS:** First and foremost: Believe women. We live in a climate where we don't believe women. We think they must have an ulterior motive. For men to challenge other men. A lot of men know men who rape. They don't say they rape, but they say "She wanted it," or "She was so drunk," so to really create an environment where rape is not accepted amongst men.

» **EXPRESS:** What made you make "NO!"?

» **SIMMONS:** I really wanted to put a black woman's face when we think about survivors. I wanted to make visible the reality of black women's lives. The average person does not think about black women as being victim-survivors. So many women and men have written about it, but it's the first documentary that focuses solely on rape in the African-American community, so it's my attempt to be a part of this growing movement and to really say, as a community, we have to put this issue at the top of national agendas the way we do racial profiling

and police brutality. We have to say: "Sexual violence in our community must end."

» [Howard University's Cramton Auditorium](#), 2455 6th St. NW; 7:30 p.m., free; 202-232-0789, ext. 6025. (Shaw-Howard University)

» MORE TOP STOPS, including Robert Earl Keen and the Birchmere, are available [here](#).

Photos by Scheherazade Tillet

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