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K-STATE PROFESSOR WITH AWARD-WINNING NEW ORLEANS-BASED FILM SEES LITTLE PROGRESS IN DIVERSITY REFORMS SINCE THE 1960s

MANHATTAN — Professor Harriet J. Ottenheimer was frustrated.

The effort she was leading to introduce a diversity overlay curriculum at Kansas State University in 1992 was being challenged by a small but vocal group of opponents. Labels like "communist," "multiculturalists" and "homosexual" were thrown around to describe those in favor of the curriculum.

The words struck a familiar chord with Ottenheimer, a professor of sociology, anthropology and social work at K-State. Retreating in her office, she pulled a file she kept on The Quorum, a 1960s New Orleans coffeehouse-cum-social movement of which she played a part. Among her files were quotes calling Quorum participants "communists," "homosexuals" and "integrationists."

"I can't begin to tell you the frustration," she said.

But that frustration became the impetus for the award-winning documentary film, "The Quorum," which Ottenheimer made with Maurice M. Martinez, whom she met at the coffeehouse. The film has claimed several honors, including first place for best documentary at Cine Noir: A Festival of Black Film 2005, best documentary at the Cape Fear Independent Film Network 2004 and was a finalist for the Atlanta Independent Black Film Festival 2005.

Research for the film included spending time on the Internet locating other Quorum participants and traveling to New Orleans to collect documents and film interviews. Ottenheimer also worked on developing the storyline for the film, finding additional archival footage and digitizing old photos and tape recordings from the coffeehouse days. A rough cut of the film was previewed by audiences in the "Big Easy" before Ottenheimer and Martinez decided to enter it in various festivals.

"It's a story I've always wanted to tell," she said.

Ottenheimer was a doctoral student at Tulane University in New Orleans in the 1960s when she became involved with The Quorum, which she said stood as a beacon of racial integration and freethinking in the segregated South. She served as secretary of its board of directors from 1963-66.

(more)

The Quorum opened in 1963 to people from all racial backgrounds, becoming a frequent target of segregationist harassment in New Orleans. In 1964 police raided The Quorum, taking 73 people to jail and accusing them of things like playing guitars out of tune and carrying on conversations with no logical end or conclusion, Ottenheimer said.

While a student in New Orleans, Ottenheimer said she witnessed two hurricanes, including Hurricane Betsy, a Category 4 hurricane that caused many of the same problems the city's residents are now coping with in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

During Hurricane Betsy, Ottenheimer offered refuge to flooding victims in her upper-story apartment in the French Quarter. "New Orleans was back up and running in a week," she said.

However, the victims' questions about the role of race in the aftermath and clean-up following Hurricane Betsy wasn't all that different than what is being raised today with Hurricane Katrina, she said.

There was talk even then about why certain levees in predominately African-American areas of the city broke, Ottenheimer said.

She said it is frustrating to see that race relations still pose a problem more than 40 years after The Quorum sought to improve them with its open-door policy in spite of blatant prejudice.

"It reprises that same discussion," she said. "It's incredibly frustrating. You've put in a lot of emotional and physical effort. No matter how big the change, it doesn't seem to stick."

Ottenheimer said on previous visits to New Orleans, she has walked or driven by the building on Rampart Street in the French Quarter that once housed The Quorum but said the spirit of the coffeehouse was gone.

"It's more like seeing a building you used to have something to do with," she said.

Ottenheimer's connections to New Orleans run even deeper than The Quorum. As a doctoral student at Tulane, she began documenting the life of blues musician Pleasant "Cousin Joe" Joseph. She and Joseph co-wrote the 1987 book, "Cousin Joe: Blues from New Orleans."

Although much of Ottenheimer's current research centers around linguistics, there are several books she plans to write about the ethnomusicology of blues and its roots in Africa. But such research has hit a snag with Hurricane Katrina.

"There's stuff I think is irretrievably lost," she said, speaking of items like taped interviews with musicians and rare recordings — even masters for a CD of Cousin Joe's last recordings that was to have been released soon by Great Southern Records with liner notes written by Ottenheimer. "There is so much that has been lost or destroyed."

More information on the film, "The Quorum," is available at <http://www.quorumthemovie.com>

The film can be purchased at <http://www.insight-media.com>