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Pitt physician's short film targets real-life racism in emergency-care setting

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From left, Sylvia Owusu-Ansah, Pitt associate professor of pediatrics and emergency medicine; actor Chanell Jones; Pitt film Professor Carl Kurlander; cinematographer Haji Muya; film director Nick Bucheit; and screenwriter Yasmine Crawley, a 2021 Pitt alum; discuss the making of "In Good Hands," a short film based on Owusu-Ansah's experiences as a pediatric emergency physician in Pittsburgh, during a Jan. 29 screening event. (Shannon Wells | University Times)

By SHANNON O. WELLS

Writer and film director Nick Bucheit vividly recalls the moment he realized Chanell Jones was meant to play pediatric emergency physician Diana Asante in a short movie based on the true experiences of a Pitt associate professor and UPMC physician.

"I was sitting somewhere in Lawrenceville. We had the casting (meeting), and Chanell walks in with these bad-ass glasses, wearing scrubs," he recalled of the Pittsburgh-based actor and musician. "We had some good talent, but all of us were like, 'Where did Chanell come from? It was pretty much a no-brainer.'"

For her part, Jones, after reading the script based on short stories by Sylvia Owusu-Ansah, Pitt associate professor of pediatrics and emergency medicine and medical director of Prehospital and EMS at UPMC Children's Hospital, immediately knew she'd found a part that was not only real, but rich with relevance about racism in the workplace.

"I was so engulfed," she said. "I was screaming from the rooftops on the inside, and I couldn't wait, I really just couldn't wait to let everybody understand ... this really is real. This is what happens, and we'll have some fun (doing it), but this is real, and this is what we go through. So that's how I prepared for it: Life."

Jones and Bucheit shared their recollections at a Feb. 1 screening for "In Good Hands" — a short film about fictional Diana Asante, a pediatric emergency attending physician — in the Center for Creativity's Understory in the Cathedral of Learning basement.

The sold-out event included a screening of the 11-minute drama followed by a panel discussion with the creative team, led by Carl Kurlander, a Pitt film professor and founder of C4C: The Pittsburgh Lens and the Pitt in LA program. Another screening and panel discussion will take place at 7 p.m. Feb. 29 at the Understory.

Kurlander recognized the dramatic potential of Owusu-Ansah's story and its factual depictions of casual racism in an emergency care setting — from patients, their parents, law enforcement officers and medical residents, among others. He encouraged Yasmine Crawley, a 2021 Pitt graduate who now works for Paramount film studios, to write and submit a script to the PITTch! 2.0 storytelling/screenplay competition. The result was the conversational-yet-bracing dialogue at the heart of "In Good Hands."

Based on Owusu-Ansah's memoir, the film depicts Asante dealing with the challenges of the last patients of her shift, including a white boy who apparently has never seen a Black female doctor, and a Black teenager — facing possibly dire medical issues — who was arrested by a skeptical, unsympathetic police officer.

A wide-ranging group of more than three dozen mentoring film professionals, Pitt students and community members took part in creating what the "In Good Hands" website describes as a "community teaching" film.

Owusu-Ansah said she sought to write a book dedicated to "all the little pediatric patients that have transformed my life."

"Each chapter is about a patient who impacted me in some way," she told UPMC Health Beat last September.

Also influenced by the 2020 murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, she noted the shock non-Black people expressed as further stories of racist behavior by public employees and others were shared. She knew there was a timely story to tell.

"What many of us as folks of color recognize, especially after the murder of George Floyd, is that our stories have not been told often enough," she said. "When brown people tell their stories, people will seem shocked about it, (as if) acts of racism — microaggressions like this

— couldn't be true ... like, 'You couldn't have experienced that.' So, I basically wanted to bring it to life."

Calling "In Good Hands" a "snippet of numerous real-life encounters," Owusu-Ansah said "everything you've seen here happened in real life: every interaction, every word spoken ... at various stages of my medical career, and so I wanted to bring that to life, not only for me, but for the sake of my patients, for the sake of health equity, and for the sake of us just to be better human beings."

Yasmine Crawley, a former student of Kurlander's, had put her arts-and-entertainment goals on hold to work on the pediatric psychiatric floor of the Johns Hopkins University Medical Center when Kurlander called. It was less than 10 days before the storytelling challenge deadline, and five days before her birthday.

"He said (Owusu-Ansah) has a story that she wants to write, and she needs a (screenplay) writer, and I was like, 'Wow, OK, the deadline is coming up. But this feels like an opportunity,'" she said. "So I applied."

Crawley's script made the cut with the Center for Creativity's selection committee, including Owusu-Ansah, as well as a Hollywood-based reader company. Crawley's work also led to an unexpected career change after she applied to the CBS network's highly selective page program. As fate would have it, her first meeting on rotation was with Susan Zirinsky, president of CBS See It Now Studios and former CBS News president.

"The experience just went so well that we gelled. (Zirinski) was like, 'I'm gonna hire you at the program. Are you OK with that? And I was like, 'Absolutely.' And that's where I still am today," she said of her See It Now role as an administrative assistant and production associate.

Owusu-Ansah called her collaboration with Crawley a natural fit. "Yasmine and I were like clockwork: 'We're taking this all the way to Hollywood, baby! And we're gonna make a short film, but we're taking it all the way.' So we pledged to each other that we would stick together and root each other on, and it's been that way ever since."

Going forward, Owusu-Ansah and Kurlander plan to promote "In Good Hands" to film festivals and for possible development into a full-length movie or TV series pilot. "I've been so blessed to have this entire team," she said.

Allegheny County Executive Sarah Innamorato, who as a District 21 state representative worked with Owusu-Ansah on "Stop the Bleed" citizen emergency training efforts, attended the screening at the filmmaker's invitation.

"She is an awesome human. I wanted to come out and support her efforts," Innamorato said after the event, calling "In Good Hands" a great opportunity to "look at the world through others' eyes and root out the evils of racism through storytelling."

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