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Filmmaker shines spotlight on Hawaiian culture, history

By Ron Wynn, rwynn@nashvillecitypaper.com
May 11, 2006

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Filmmaker Edgy Lee has usually worked outside traditional arenas in compiling and making her productions, but for her latest work, *The Hawaiians: Reflecting Spirit*, she gladly joined forces with the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. The one-hour documentary debuts tonight at 9 p.m. on WNPT-Ch. 8, and offers viewers a chance to see both gripping historical accounts and also get a better understanding of a dire problem threatening Hawaii's traditional population.

"I wanted to make viewers aware that the native Hawaiian population is in danger of suffering the same fate as Native Americans in the West," Lee said. "The urgency is there because there has been a physical and spiritual displacement of thousands of Hawaiians. Unless there is federal recognition of Native Hawaiians, and something is done to stop the displacement, the great Hawaiian culture and heritage will be destroyed."

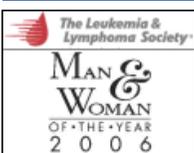
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But Lee has been careful not to turn the film into simply a propaganda exercise or a history lesson. Instead, it uses striking, visually magnificent photography as well as interviews with such figures as navigator Nainoa Thompson, Senator Daniel Akaka, traditional healer Alapai Kahuna and Ni'ihau elders Annie and Kahala Kanahale in presenting a visually effective work that conveys the diversity and importance of Hawaiian tradition and culture dating back to the 1840s.

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The various interview subjects also make several key points in stirring fashion, most notably salt-maker Wilma Holi, who wasn't on Lee's original list, but was added at the urging of a mutual friend. She talks passionately about the problems that she and her family have faced trying to preserve their legacy of salt making while being simultaneously threatened by the incursion of corporate businesses and constant regulations and oversight from the government.

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Another major contributor is ethno-botanist Isabella Abbott, who was the first native Hawaiian woman to earn a Ph.D. and is now a professor at the University of Hawaii. Abbott criticizes what she views as the avarice and greed of developers who find loopholes in laws designed to preserve agricultural lands, and praises Lee's film as spotlighting the real Hawaii rather than the usual tourist locations.

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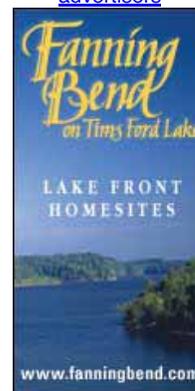
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The Hawaiians: Reflecting Spirit was shot in high-definition and is narrated by Winona Rubin. Besides the mix of contemporary and vintage footage and the footage presenting traditional customs and practices, there are also sections covering the resurgence in island pride and culture that emerged during the '60s and '70s.

"We're hopeful that this film will not only show people who we are, but also educate them about the importance of preserving our culture," Lee said. "I hope that the film also can convince those in Congress who don't support federal recognition how critical it is to ensuring our survival as a people."



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