

Fly By Light Producer and One Common Unity Co-Founder Hawah Joins Reel Ralk with Film DC

Leslie Green: ...welcome to Real Talk with FilmDC. This is your host, Leslie Green, director of communications for the DC office of motion picture and television development, also, known as the DC film office.

This month, we are joined by Hawah. He is the executive director and cofounder of One Common Unity, and producer of the upcoming film, Fly By Light. It's the documentary. Thank you for joining us, Hawah.

Hawah: Thanks for having me, I'm really happy to be here.

Leslie: Absolutely. First of all, for those who may not know, our agency is one of the sponsors of an incredible new program called "Fly By Light." It's the brainchild of Hawah.

First, I'd like to start off by giving our listeners, enlightening them on what Fly By Light is, and what you do with One Common Unity.

Hawah: Definitely. One Common Unity is a nonprofit organization here in DC. We've been here for 14 years.

Fly By Light is the culmination of 14 years of development work here in DC. We took the best practices from programs we have been running since the year 2000, and we synthesize them into one comprehensive program that we renamed Fly By Light.

In Fly By Light, we work at the intersection of arts, social justice and conflict resolution. We teach young people emotional literacy, and inspire them to become performing artists and use their voices to create social change.

We work in high schools throughout the city, and we have program sites at Cardozo High School, Bell High School, Wilson High School and Roosevelt High School right now. With the launch of the film, were looking to expand Fly By Light into more high schools around the DC area.

Leslie: Excellent. How did the documentary come about? It's a program, and then, you decided to make a film about it.

Hawah: It's a really interesting story, actually. About four years ago, we are having a board retreat weekend and we recognized and we saw that over the decades that we'd existed, we'd run multiple different youth programs that were successful in their own ways. For example, we had a program called Revolushine, back from 2002 to 2005.

In that program, we took young people into the recording studio and we taught them how to become songwriters, and we pair them with professional musicians and took them into the recording studio and made CDs every summer of positive, uplifting music.

We also had another uplifting partnership program with "Straight No Chaser productions," which is a local film-making company in DC, and that was a youth film-making program where we produced two documentary films. What was called "Away With Words," the other was called The MLK Streets Project.

In that program, we taught young people how to become filmmakers, and how to work in front of and behind the camera. But then, we also saw a big need to evolve into have something that could allow us to take this program, the Fly By Light program, to another level.

In that board meeting, we thought of bringing the best practices of the other programs into one comprehensive program, and we wanted to make a film about it to show the process of creating this new program. How do you launch a new grassroots program in DC? What does it take to be a facilitator, working with youth?

Just the ups and downs of that whole process. In that space, I've got a dear friend, her name is Ellie Walton, who I've been friends with for probably about 14 years. She's an award-winning filmmaker from DC.

I approached Ellie, and I said, "Ellie, we're about to launch a new youth program, and it's called Fly By Light, and I really think that you should make a film about it."

From the board, we all thought that Ellie was the perfect choice. She's a community activist, she's been a filmmaker, born and raised in DC, and we thought she would be the perfect person to make the movie.

She agreed, and we offered her exclusive, unrestricted access to all of our youth and the youth that signed up for the pilot program, they understood that they were also signing up to be in a movie, which is interesting. We also had the whole intention of using this movie as a springboard and as a platform to grow the program.

We wanted to tell the story of why this work is so important, and we wanted to tell the stories of the young people that were going through the process of healing through past grief and trauma, of learning emotional, too, to better handle their anger, and have more healthy relationships.

We wanted to tell that story. Ellie agreed, and we move forward from there. We created a crowdsourcing campaign, we raised money, we built our curriculum and we launched Fly By Light, this was back in 2011.

Leslie: Wow, that's amazing. I'm glad you mentioned Ellie, she's one of our filmmakers of the month, I will give her a shout out. She's an incredible filmmaker, it's great that you got a chance to work with her.

I understand this is your third film, and I know that you didn't get started as a filmmaker, what is it like stepping into the ROI a filmmaker? What did you like most about that experience?

Hawah: Definitely. I've been an artist for a lot of my life. I'm a poet, a spoken word artist, and I'm a writer.

I've written a few books, but I've never going to school for film-making. Besides what I've read through books and online, I've never had classes. What does it mean to be a producer, and how do you produce a movie?

It's how I'm the executive director of an organization, as well. That's a lot of skills you have to learn while you're in the hotseat, and it's almost a better education than you can get in the school. Personally, that's what I think.

Being a filmmaker was never a vision I had of myself at a younger age, but excitingly, I was thrown into the space back in 2007 with Straight No Chaser productions, and I've learned so much from working with them and creating *Away With Words*.

I just love the story-boarding, I love thinking about the arcs, and the narratives, and thinking about characters, and how to tie stories together. The you mediums were so interconnected, whether you're writing a narrative, or a book, or a short story, or a nonfiction novel, or whether you're a photographer.

The anesthetic and the eye of being a photographer, which I was for a long time. I used to do a lot of black-and-white photography right out of college. It was almost like I was re-engaging old skills, but as a producer, I've actually found myself doing a lot of the work of organizing a team and bringing the talent to the table.

One of my main roles in this film has been identifying the people that we want to come and edit the movie. For example, we found a great editor, his name is McGee. He did a fantastic job in the final stages, editing the movie for us, lining up the sound people and deciding who do we want to use to help with the score for the movie.

We did a full original score for the movie. Things like that, bringing all the talent to the table and helping to make it all glue and mesh together, I feel like that's a lot of what I did. And then of course, Ellie and I, we had a lot of late nights struggling over which 30 seconds to leave and in which 30 seconds to leave out.

That was a long process. Then, we have an executive producer on the movie, his name was Steve Ma. He was really instrumental, as well, and involved in some of these decisions.

They were hard decisions, because we were trying to balance the story that we wanted to sell for the organization, and the authentic story that we wanted to tell for the youth, and what they were going through. It was a really hard dance, a difficult dance, but I think we hit it.

Leslie: I know you did. Tell our listeners where they can go and check out this wonderful film.

Hawah: Sure. We are going to premiere the film, the world premiere of the movie is on May 1st, May Day, International Worker's Day, Friday evening at the National Geographic Grosner Theater.

Now, we've done advance screenings up until now. Some people have told me, "I think I saw that." You might have. There's been a few people that have attended private screenings that we've done, and advance screenings that we've done, but this is the final product.

We're not going to open it again. We've got two versions of the movie, one is 83 minutes any other version is 59 minutes. The shorter 59 minute version we've been using in schools, and it's perfect for a 90 minute classroom.

You show the movie, and then, there's 30 minutes left for discussion and dialogue. We've got the education thought, we've got the full theatrical release. On Friday, May 1st, you all will be seeing the 83 minute feature-length. It's right downtown, Nat Geo, 1600 M Street, Northwest Washington DC.

Leslie, we will not be selling tickets at the door, if you want to come to the movie, you've got to get your ticket online in advance. That's just how we're doing it.

Leslie: Where can I go to get those tickets?

Hawah: You can go online to OneCommonUnity.org, O-N-E, common, unity, U-N-I-T-Y, .org.

You can also go to our Facebook page. If you're on Facebook, just type in three words, One Common Unity. You'll find links, it'll say world premiere really big and red letters, can't miss it. You could miss it, but I hope you wouldn't miss it.

Click on that, and you'll go to brown paper tickets, and you'll buy the tickets from Brown paper tickets online. We just got nominated for best documentary over at Nova, and we got the audience choice award at Boulder. We're getting a little bit of traction in the film Festival world.

Leslie: That's pretty amazing. I'm sure we have some listeners that are saying, "Wow, that's an incredible program, how can I get involved?" Are people able to get involved in this program at this stage?

Hawah: For sure. We're in the process of preparing for the summer, and most importantly, what you'll see in the movie, and what the movie really climaxes with is when we take the 16 youth in the program on a rites of passage retreat into the mountains of West Virginia.

We do these retreats with our young people, these overnight retreats every summer. We take our young people into the mountains for 5 to 7 nights, and really, really challenge them to move out of their comfort zones.

We're looking for adult mentors to come along this summer. If you're interested in getting involved and being a mentor and I retreat this summer, you can just come to the premier.

That's going to help you know what you're getting into. Two, you want to get in touch with us and let us know that you are interested. We have a pretty rigorous vetting process for mentors.

In the September school year, starting in fall of 2015, we'll be back in our schools, and we'll also probably be reaching out to two or three new schools for new program sites.

We're also looking for adult professionals, whether you're an artist, a lawyer or an educator, whatever you might do if you want to come and work as a teaching assistant to one of our facilitators, we have room for volunteers.

Leslie: Excellent. Is there anything else you want to share with them before we let you go?

Hawah: Excellent question. I don't think so. I just want to shut out there have been so many people involved in the production of this movie. This has been a real, community grown DC film. I feel that this is DC, the DC corner is from Anacostia to Colombia Heights.

This is your film, this is our film, and the amount of people that were involved in its production and its creation, the young people whose lives are uplifted through this movie. At the world premiere, we're going to have a Q&A, too.

All the young people who are featured in the movie are going to be there, and we'll be having an exclusive question and answer period after the movie. Come out, come support, get yourself a ticket.

If you can't come on May 1st, you can order the film online from our website, and we can send you a DVD copy.

Leslie: Awesome. Again, thank you for joining us, Hawah. If you missed it at any point throughout the podcast, you can check them out at www.OneCommonUnity.org.

They're also on social media. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, it's all One Common Unity. Thank you all for tuning in to Real Talk with FilmDC.

Again, this is your host, Leslie Green, signing off. Don't forget to check us out on the web at film.dc.gov, on Facebook at FilmDC, on Twitter at DCFilmOffice, and on Instagram at DCFilmOffice. Catch you next time!