



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE February 10, 2011

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Screening of Documentary about African-American Leaders in Commerce, followed by Panel to discuss History and Future of Norris Community in Commerce, Texas

[Commerce, Texas]—The new documentary film *The Other Side of the Track* will debut at the Texas A&M-Commerce campus later this month in celebration of Black History Month. Documentary is the first to be produced by the Converging Literacies Center (CLiC), and those involved hope others will follow. “We are actually pursuing a media grant for another, related project that is grounded in themes like those driving *The Other Side*: engaged citizenship and community leadership across rural, Northeast Texas,” explains CLiC co-director and project supervisor Dr. Shannon Carter. Carter is an English professor at Texas A&M-Commerce who studies activism in the rural south.

The screening—on Monday, February 21, 2011, at 3:00—will take place in the Hall of Languages on the A&M-C campus in conjunction with the first *CLiC Talk* of 2011, a regular, interdisciplinary lecture series dedicated to texts and writers in twentieth-century, everyday contexts. Immediately following the screening of this 25-minute film, individuals featured in the film will join those involved in its creation for a conversation about race relations featured in film and community.

The film takes viewers on a moving journey into the everyday experiences of Commerce’s local African-American community before integration, with local leadership serving as guides. Existing within Commerce city limits since the 1890s, the Norris Community was home to the vast majority of Commerce’s African American population for much of the 20th century. Not unlike other black communities throughout the segregated south, the Norris Community was the site for the all-black Norris School and businesses (barber shops, grocery stores, restaurants) serving Commerce’s African American citizens in the years before they had access to the shopping, entertainment, and schools serving the white population.

Similar communities existed throughout the south until Jim Crow laws and customs gave way to integration in last half of the 20th century.

What is most unique about the documentary and the lives it chronicles is the levels of civic engagement these individuals reveal and, by example, encourage in the film’s audience. This is not the rural south we expected. Or is it? The project’s creative lead Luca Morazzano (PhD student and research assistant for CLiC) describes the project this way: “Through this documentary – as a filmmaker with the attitude of an ethnographer - I let Commerce speak about itself. The slow rhythm of a small town was filmed along with the stories of its citizens who made its (hi)story.”

Morazzano began working with Drs. Carter and Conrad more than a year ago, dragging a large camera borrowed from Media Services across town to take part in countless oral history interviews with locals, compile footage from tours of the Norris School (empty for some years), the oldest African-American church in town, the Norris Community Club, and the original, segregated cemetery. He produced the film over the summer from his home in

Italy. Morazzano has extensive experience with documentary films, but this was his first experience with race relations in the American South. As an Italian from an urban environment (Rome), however, Morazzana came to this project knowing far less about rural Texas and related ideas. That fresh perspective and his attention to detail led the project in new and exciting directions. It is his hope to complete another documentary about race relations in this area before he completes the PhD program next year.

Panel discussion that follows screening will include filmmaker Morazzano, but it will also feature individuals starring in documentary and local history. Together attendees and panelists will explore topics like local responses to the civil rights movement, including the integration of Commerce ISD and East Texas State University in the mid 1960s and collective efforts like the Norris Community Club (NCC) advocating change for local black citizens. The NCC was established in 1975 to provide “a clear line of communication” among Norris Community residents, the Commerce City Council, and ETSU (now Texas A&M-Commerce). Panelists include founding members of the Norris Community Club Ivory Moore, Billy Reed, and Opal Pannell.

Additional information available at <http://www.convergingliteraciescenter.wordpress.com>

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