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FSC professor, filmmaker to visit Rwanda

Framingham State College Professor Robert Johnson Jr. will be heading to Rwanda this week with the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The group will be showing a number of American documentaries, including Johnson's own, award-winning "No Short Climb."

By Scott O'Connell/Daily News staff

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A Framingham State College professor is headed to Rwanda this week on a mission of celluloid diplomacy.

Robert Johnson Jr., chairman of the Communication Arts Department, is part of a contingent representing the U.S. State Department's **Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs** that will screen several documentaries in the African nation between July 14 and 26.

The trip is part of a new program sponsored by the University Film and Video Association and International Documentary Association that shows American documentary films in foreign countries.

Johnson's documentary "No Short Climb" - about blacks' contributions to U.S. weapons technology - was one of 30 films chosen for the program's first run last year, but he was unable to accept an invitation to attend screenings in South Africa.

When the program, in May, offered him a chance to join the delegation to Rwanda, Johnson said he "jumped at the chance."

Johnson is one of two filmmakers making the journey to Africa. The other is Patti Bonnett, whose documentary, "Come Back to Sudan," is one of the 30 films being screened.

Their group will follow a "rigorous schedule" during the trip, visiting as many as four sites a day, Johnson said. He and Bonnett will teach at workshops, appear on radio programs and meet with many cultural and business ministers, as well as local filmmakers.

They will also attend movie screenings at the Rwanda Film Festival, Rwanda Film Institute and the National University of Rwanda.

Johnson will blog about the experience at noshortclimb.blogspot.com.

The purpose of the program is to spark debate and encourage new points of view - strengths of the documentary film medium, Johnson said.

"Documentaries tend to be accepted as truthful - there's an expectation that what you're seeing is real," he said. "The films that we chose are very provocative and hard-hitting - they don't spare anybody in their criticism."

Documentaries like "Trouble in the Water," which focuses on Hurricane Katrina, and "Which Way Home," about the experiences of migrant children journeying through Mexico to the U.S., will also show Rwandans a different side of American life.

"It's cultural diplomacy," Johnson said. "It's showing that there are certain freedoms we have in this country. It says who we are as a nation and as a people."

Johnson said he hoped that the films could teach Rwandans how to tell the stories of their own country, which is recovering from civil war and genocide that occurred in the early 1990s.

"That's still a part of their ongoing discussions," he said. "If they decide to use our package of documentaries to further that, that's great, though I'm not sure if it's something they need."

Johnson said a highlight of his trip will be talking to Rwandan students about the art of filmmaking.

"It's been a while since I taught workshops," he said.

Johnson added that he's "looking forward to all facets" of the journey.

"I'm counting down the days left until I take off."