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HEADLINE: Local dignitaries eye premiere of gang documentary's sequel

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BODY:

Friday night in North Little Rock - to borrow from the advertising slogan of a certain pay-cable net - it's not TV, or HBO. The atmosphere will instead be more that of a Hollywood premiere. At 7 p.m. at the Patrick H. Hays Senior Center, Arkansans will have their first chance to see the documentary, *Gang War II: Back in the Hood*, which will receive its broadcast premiere at 9 p.m. Aug. 26 on HBO.

The film updates the 1994 HBO documentary *Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock*, which at the time of its debut tied the city's alarming percapita homicide rate to roiling gang rivalries and wrenched the city's reputation, in-state and nationally.

The films share a director - Marc Levin - and at least two subjects, Leifel Jackson, a former Crip, and Marvin Weathersby, a former Blood. Levin and Jackson will participate in a question-and-answer session following Friday's screening.

But there are clues that the new film will be received more warmly by the city. In the mid-1990s, the city had scrambled to recover from the earlier documentation, which unfavorably compared Little Rock's murder rate to that of New York and Los Angeles. The earlier film also happened to capture a midafternoon drive-by shooting and portrayed it as a commonplace activity in downtown Little Rock.

First, proceeds from the screening's \$50 tickets benefit Butterfly Community Ministries, which funds the Sherman Park Our Club, an afterschool program now operated by Jackson with the goal of diverting children from gangs.

Second, the premiere will assemble the same sort of dignitaries and elected officials who spurned the first film. Mayors Jim Dailey of Little Rock and Patrick Hays of North Little Rock will attend the screening and panel discussion, along with U.S. Rep. Vic Snyder, Pulaski County Judge Buddy Villines, Arkansas Attorney General Mike Beebe and Larry Jegley, Pulaski County Prosecuting Attorney. An ecumenical group of the city's bishops and religious leaders make up the event's host committee.

"I think that's a statement being made," Vince Insalaco said of the officials' presence. Insalaco organized Friday's premiere, on the heels of the June benefit screening he planned for the documentary *The Hunting of the President*. Proceeds from that screening, which attracted 1,300 people to Little Rock's Statehouse Convention Center, benefited the Claudia Foundation, a charity for young women founded by Linda Bloodworth-Thomas, wife of that film's director, Harry Thomason.

"What's unique about this film is the transformation Leifel Jackson has made in that he was the subject of the first film as a criminal gang member, and now is the director of a gang intervention program," Insalaco said.

Insalaco plans to structure the question-and-answer session in three parts: a creative discussion of the film's production followed by a discussion of the city's gang problem, then debate about a solution.

The city's response to the original film was to undertake a multimedia, multi-year advertising campaign, "Big on Little Rock," which became ubiquitous in the mid-'90s.

Another part of the response was to impugn Levin's methods and to suggest that the intimations of impending violence were overblown.

"We were exposed to a lot of anger from the original," Levin said.

"People said we had ruined the image of Little Rock, and that we were as much to blame for what was going on there. There were rumors we had staged the drive-by, or paid gang members, which was just ridiculous. Editorials said `HBO, Go Home. HBO, Don't Come Back.'"

Levin went on to hint that the new film carries a more redemptive message for the city. "Little Rock has made a lot of progress, obviously," he said. But he understands there will be apprehension about his return, manifested in the film's premiere and his appearance Friday. "I'm sure there are some people who are holding their breath."

FILM Gang War II: Back in the Hood 7 p.m. Friday, Patrick H. Hays Senior Center, 401 W. Pershing St., North Little Rock Tickets: \$50, benefit Butterfly Community Ministries (501) 834-0034

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