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JUNE 27, 2018

## New documentary to highlight advertising icon's legacy



Thomas Burrell (center) was all smiles with his wife Madeleine and veteran radio host Richard Steele at a June 27 VIP screening of a new documentary about his life at the University of Chicago. – Wendell Hutson

By WENDELL HUTSON  
Contributing Writer

This week the Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago hosted a VIP screening of a new documentary about advertising icon Thomas Burrell, who founded Burrell Communications Group, the largest black-owned marketing firm in Chicago.

The one-hour documentary will air 9:30 p.m. Thursday, June 28 on the PBS station WTTW.

The one thing Burrell said he hopes people take away from the documentary is “learn to fly high and never give up on your dreams because anything is possible,” he said.

The documentary traced Burrell's beginning into the advertising industry at a time when there were no blacks working at local advertising companies. Burrell, 79,

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started his career working in the mailroom at a Chicago advertising firm where he said his interest in advertising grew.

"I would see the different photos coming into the mailroom sent by clients for their ads and I noticed blacks were not included in any images," recalled Burrell. "I thought the photos were good but could be better if black folks were also in them."

While still a student at Chicago's Roosevelt University Burrell further developed his advertising skills by working as a copywriter with Wade Advertising in Chicago, and later working for Foote Cone & Belding in Chicago as a copy supervisor. By 1971, Burrell had earned a bachelor's degree in English from Roosevelt and founded his own ad agency, whose focus was creating ads geared towards black consumers.



Veteran Chicago journalist Robin Robinson moderated a question and answer session following the June 26 VIP screening of a new documentary about the life of Thomas Burrell, founder of the Chicago-based ad agency Burrell Communications Group. – Wendell Hutson

"I had no idea that when I started this company it would become such a dominant force in the advertising world," explained Burrell. "I was just looking to survive when I created Burrell Communications. I wanted to be able to provide for my family and help others do the same for their families."

And while he is proud of the achievements Burrell Communications has made within the advertising industry, he said, more work needs to be done.

"There is still a void that needs to be filled in advertising and that's more firms aimed at creating positive images of blacks in their ads," said Burrell, who lives in the South Loop with his wife Madeleine.

In 2004, Burrell announced his retirement and sold the company to Fay Ferguson and McGhee Osse, who serve as co-chief executive officers for Burrell Communications and who both attended the June 26 screening.

First-time producer Denise Pendleton, who previously worked with the late Don Cornelius, founder of the popular TV show "Soul Train," made the documentary.

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“I was going to actually work at Burrell Communications when I was in high school until I got a job at Soul Train,” said Pendleton, 60, who attended Columbia College Chicago. “People need to know Thomas Burrell and his story. That’s why I wanted to do this documentary. I began shooting this documentary in January and finished my last interview two months ago in April.”

Pendleton added that she wants people to walk away from watching the documentary knowing who Thomas Burrell is as a person and to show people that black consumers play a big role in what types of ads you see on TV and hear on the radio.

“I want people feeling proud when they see this movie and to know blacks spend a lot of money on goods and services and we want to see us depicted in a positive way on TV,” said Pendleton.

A question and answer session followed the screening moderated by veteran Chicago journalist Robin Robinson.

“[After watching the movie backstage] it was good for people to see what went on behind the scenes at Burrell and how 30 seconds of magic was done when it came to making commercials,” said Robinson.

About 300 people attended the screening including Sonya Moore Lewis, who worked in the public relations office at Burrell Communications from 1992 to 1994.

“Working there was unreal, I never experienced an atmosphere like Burrell,” she said. “It was a fun and friendly place to work and everyone was like family. Everyone had so much pride there because we felt privileged to work at Burrell Communications and to work with a visionary like Thomas Burrell.”

Burrell added that one lesson people can learn from the movie is that success is only what you make it and the decisions you make will not only impact your life but the lives of those around you.

“The one thing I can say about my life is that I have been able to be successful without ever having to say anything about myself,” said Burrell. “And it’s a blessing when people say good things about you.”



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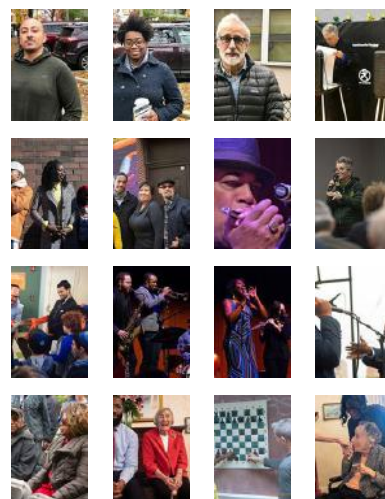


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**Stacey Miller**

JUNE 28, 2018 @ 8:19 AM

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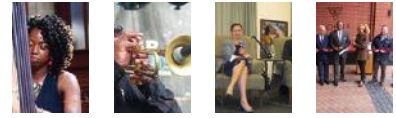


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JULY 1, 2018 @ 9:27 AM

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I watched this documentary. Its cool. I want to watch it again and again.



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