

# Filmmakers discuss 1964 racial uprising

Rochester unrest became subject of documentary

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This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Emmy-nominated film "July '64," directed by Carvin Eison and produced by Christine Christopher.

"July '64" recounts the three-day racial uprising in Rochester's Black neighborhoods.

On the night of July 24, 1964, the city's longstanding issues of institutional racism, overcrowding, rundown housing, lack of job opportunities, and police brutality ignited violent unrest. Directed by Eison and produced by Chris Christopher, "July '64" uses archival footage, news reports, and interviews with witnesses and participants to dive into the causes and impacts of the event.

Sixty years after the July uprising of 1964, Eison and Christopher came together to share the stories of those living in the community during one of the most pivotal moments in Rochester's history.

The following is a Q&A with Eison and Christopher. All answers have been edited to clarity and length:

**What made you realize this was a project you wanted to take on?**

**Carvin Eison:** David Gantt came to Chris and I, and David was thinking that history is dying and that all the people who know what happened here are passing away. And so David came to us and said, "Would we be interested in telling this story?"

**Christine Christopher:** We were both also in total agreement that ongoing history is often dictated by the past. And if the journalism is missing a perspective or a voice, then the ongoing history will always be flawed. So we decided that since this event had been primarily covered by the white press TV and print, we would go back and talk to the people who were actually involved.

**What were some of the responses to the film once it was released?**

**Christine Christopher:** It was over-



**Black residents and police face each other in the street during the Rochester riots in July 1964. Black families had been suffering under widespread racism in Rochester for years.** ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE, FILE

whelming. The initial screening had been at the Dryden Theatre, and the line was out the door and down the street. Afterward, we did a talk-back, and it was almost like we had ripped off a bandage. There was so much emotion in the room.

**Carvin Eison:** People were elated. The responses were extraordinary. Jack Garner, who was one of the most important critics, certainly in Rochester, and wrote nationally for Gannett, gave the film a nine out of 10.

**What do you hope people learn from the film?**

**Carvin Eison:** I hope when people look at the film, we can discuss these kinds of things, and there can be more clarity about how this community became the community that it is now and

how can we possibly make the adjustments that are necessary? This is part of the history of this community. People like to say, 'Oh, it's Black history.' Oh, no, no. It's American history. It's Rochester history.

**Christine Christopher:** I hope people take away an understanding of how hardcore inequities affect an entire region and a city. That's certainly what we saw when making this film. Your own life experience, while valuable and important to you, does not reflect the entire human experience – even of those who live in close proximity to you.

**What was the inspiration for including the poem "Harlem" by Langston Hughes?**

**Carvin Eison:** Eison quotes the poem

saying, "The lazy, laughing south with blood on her mouth. But I, who am black, would love her, but she spits in my face. So now I seek the north, the cold face north, for she, they say, is a kinder mistress."

That's why we opened with the poem because it was a sort of metaphor for leaving the South and coming to the North, searching for opportunity. And we closed with it because it talks about a dream deferred. Does it go away or does it explode? And it exploded.

*Genae Shields is the business & development impact reporter. Reach out at [gshields@gannett.com](mailto:gshields@gannett.com) or on Instagram: @genaebriphoto for questions, comments, or concerns. Thank you for your continued support!*