

Ferris Professor Accepts Gig From Will Smith

By Collen Pierson, The Grand Rapids Press (May 1, 2006)

It's not often that a college teacher is summoned to California for the chance to work with famous actor, and first-time director, Will Smith. Such was the case for David Pilgrim, sociology professor and curator of the Ferris State University's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia in Big Rapids.

"I consider it a blessing and very unexpected," Pilgrim said. "Will Smith is the easiest person in the world to work with. He is very humble. This is the first time he has ever directed anything and he wanted me to be a part of it."

Smith's directing debut of the UPN sitcom "All of Us" aired on Monday, April 24, 2006. The episode was entitled "The N Word," and examines what happens when Bobby Jr. blurts out the infamous epithet at his birthday party thus igniting debate among the adults at the gathering. It makes all of us examine why this word is still allowed to work its way into conversations without a second thought. Pilgrim thought the initial phone call -- asking him to be a consultant on the show -- was just "a weird phone call -- not legitimate."

"Then I was asked to come spend a day with Will Smith. I stayed for eight days," he said. "I wanted to do it right and make a contribution. The reviews were extremely positive."

Pilgrim is well known for collecting items that defame and belittle Africans and their American descendants. He is the founder, primary donor and curator of The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids. He has developed a collection of more than 5,000 items that portray blacks as Mammies, Sambos, Coons and other racial caricatures. Pilgrim claims to be a garbage collector of racist garbage. He also has produced and won several awards for a documentary of the museum's activities.

How did Will Smith get wind of David Pilgrim? The professor is a published author of works featuring race relations and community studies. One essay examined the epithet.

"I think they wanted someone who would handle the topic intelligently and not perpetuate stereotypes. I worked with the script, actors and producer. I was brought out there to lend constructive criticism and find mistakes."

"It was cool -- I consider it a one-shot deal," he said.

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