



Film

Film Examines Interplay of Race and a Flawed Child Support System

BU alum's documentary Where's Daddy? focuses on hardships facing African American fathers / BY AMY LASKOWSKI

PARENTS WHO HAVE NO REPORTED INCOME AND those who make less than \$10,000 a year account for 70 percent of the total child support debt owed, according to a study by the Urban Institute. Parents in child support default often face strained family relations, financial ruin, and in extreme cases, jail time. In his new feature-length documentary *Where's Daddy?* Rel Dowdell (COM'96) tackles the dysfunctional child support system, which, he argues, is especially hard on African American fathers.

Take the case of Walter L. Scott, who was \$18,000 in child support default when he was pulled over by police in 2015, and fatally shot in the back as he fled on foot. Scott's brother said it was the threat of jail time and loss of his job, two

Rel Dowdell (COM'96) was moved to make the film in part by the media's portrayal of African American men as neglectful fathers. "Why not show the other side, the African American father who does want to be a loving parent, but has hindrances?"

consequences he had suffered previously, that compelled him to run.

Dowdell, who earned a master's in film production, says he was moved to make the film by the anecdotes of friends and by the media's portrayal of African American men as neglectful fathers. "A lot of this comes from shows like *Maury Povich* or courtroom TV, where they have a black man in court who is behind on child support," Dowdell says. "If those are the only images out there of African American men as fathers, it's very demonizing.... Why not show the other side, the African American father who does want to be a dedicated, loving parent, but has hindrances?"

In 2015, Dowdell and his production team set out to find dads who were navigating the child sup-

port system in the Philadelphia area. Former Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver Fred Barnett was willing to talk, as was the rapper Freeway. The team also interviewed clinical psychologists, attorneys, and mothers, and they saw time and again that the big victims of the system's shortcomings are children. Fathers, too, are badly hurt, and tend to self-destruct from guilt.

Often, Dowdell says, fathers go into court unprepared and without a lawyer because they can't afford counsel. ("If they could, they probably would have been able to afford child support payments," he says.) Many times they aren't aware that they can have their monthly payment reassessed if they change jobs. Those who are jailed can lose their jobs, which puts them deeper in debt. Some lose their driver's license,

⊕ **ONLINE:** Watch a trailer of *Rel Dowdell's film Where's Daddy?* at bu.edu/bostonia.

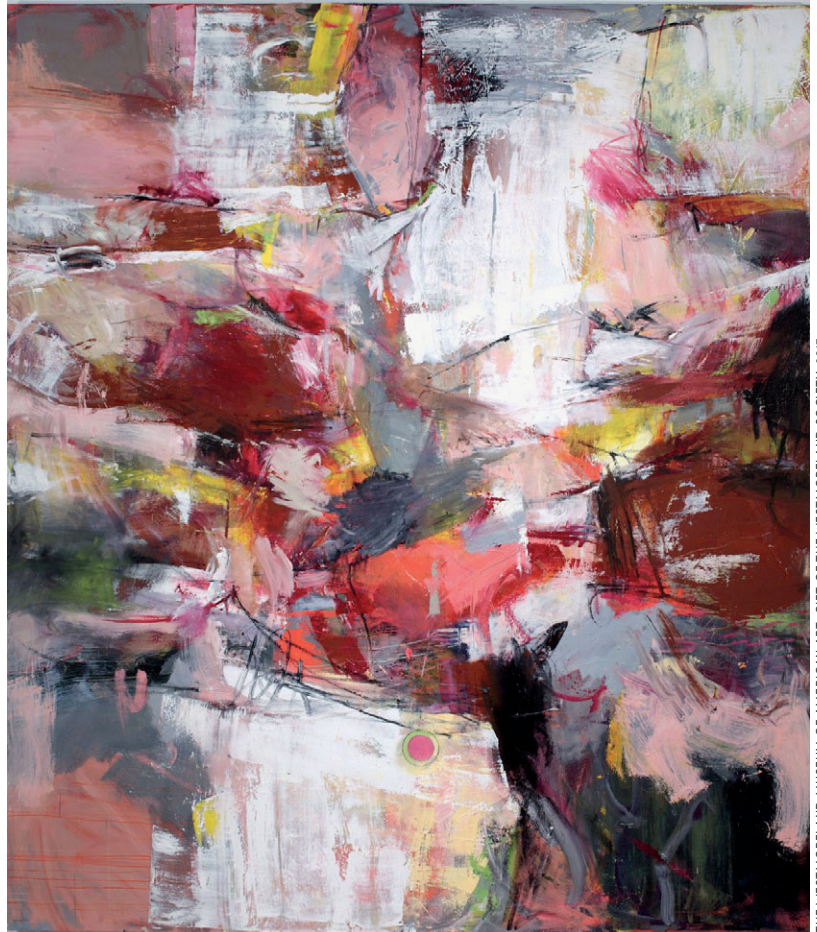
which makes it hard to get to work or visit their children.

Dowdell had previously written and directed two feature films, *Changing the Game* and *Train Ride*. *Where's Daddy?* took

about two years to complete, he says, and like many documentaries, was harder to make than a typical fictional film. "In a feature film, I know how each scene will play out, what the actors need to say. But with a documentary, you don't know what you're going to get," he says. "I ask questions, and then when I start to see people break down crying, and tell me things that are very personal.... It is gratifying to know that you are getting people's stories that would have never been told."

George Lilly (CGS'54, COM'56), chair of SJJ Broadcast Management Corporation, was co-executive producer of *Where's Daddy?* Lilly and Dowdell met when Dowdell was an undergrad, and Lilly helped fund Dowdell's BU film thesis, which won first place in the Redstone Film Festival and later was expanded to become *Train Ride*.

"His latest work is magnificent," Lilly says. "He openly addresses one of the greatest problems facing the black community today. He's up there with Spike Lee, people who can do commercial work but make a documentary on socially significant issues."



THE WESTMORELAND MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, GIFT OF THE WESTMORELAND SOCIETY, 2017

↑ *Bluffs*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 96" x 84," 2016

SCOTT HUNTER (CFA'93) paints his subjects in recognizable and unrecognizable ways, toying with what he calls "the need to merge figuration with a love of abstract expressionism." His abstract expressionist piece *Bluffs* was recently purchased by the Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Greensburg, Pa., for its permanent collection. The painting hangs in the museum's post-1950s gallery.

Hunter previously participated in Artists in Action, Westmoreland's artist-in-residency program, and completed a 10-by-30-foot figurative mural titled *Authorized Personnel Only*. The mural was on view at the museum in 2017.

In his artist statement, he says he "hopes that each new painting or collage is a step forward. When successful, one piece will inform the next and allow it to become something entirely new."

Learn more about Hunter's work at scotthunterfineart.com.