

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

True/False short comes to classrooms with civil rights tie

By [Natalie Devlin](#)

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COLUMBIA — What started in the streets of Birmingham, Ala., made its way to the True/False Film Festival and is now in the classrooms of Hickman High School.

["The Barber of Birmingham,"](#) a 26-minute short film shown this past weekend at True/False, was viewed in Marcus James' African-American history classes at Hickman on Monday to promote voter registration.

The film, which was produced by [Chicken & Egg Pictures](#), takes place during the civil rights movement and during the 2008 presidential election. It follows James Armstrong, an African-American and a barber in Birmingham who lived in both time periods.

Judith Helfand, one of the three who produced the film, attended the two morning screenings. Making the point that voting is relevant to the students, she asked, "Who will be able to vote in the next election?" In the first class, almost every person's hand went up. In the second, about half did.

While watching the film, the students were fairly attentive, many of them resting their chins on their palms. A few seemed to have dozed off for a bit. In the corner, their teacher, James, twirled a small American flag.

"I was blown away both times, even watching it twice," James said. "This is speaking to them directly."

The film uses Armstrong's story to tell the larger story of the long transition from the challenges many African-Americans once faced in going to the polls to the election of Barack Obama.

"I found it very inspirational and very informing," student Joseph Berry said. "For me, it showed that it is an important thing to vote. Now I can just walk up to the (voting) booth because of what those people did."

Directors Gail Dolgin and Robin Fryday made "The Barber of Birmingham," which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January, to promote voter registration and bring current voting rights issues to light, Helfand said. (Dolgin died of cancer before the film was finished.)

Student Meghann Young said she was excited when she got the right to vote.

"That was the first thing I did when I turned 18, I went out and registered to vote," she said.

The class seemed to respond strongly to the film and the issues it raised. Michael Tatum said he looks forward to voting in the 2012 presidential election— his first.

James said understanding the struggle people went through to get the right to vote might help encourage young people, including his students, to vote.

"I don't know how many people, as well as myself as an earlier voter, have taken that right for granted," James said.

The Missouri Senate recently approved a constitutional amendment requiring voters to show photo identification. If approved by the full legislature, it would go to voters in 2012. It is designed to prevent voter fraud.

Some of James' students worried aloud that this might make it more difficult for younger voters.

"When I went to vote, I had to bring my ID, which wasn't a problem because I had my driver's license," student Natalie Collins said. "If I didn't have it, I guess I wouldn't have been able to vote."

Helfand said she is concerned that not all young people would be able to meet these requirements.

"The main point is that they're putting a lot of hurdles," she said.

The filmmakers are considering some sort of partnership with Rock the Vote, an organization that encourages youth political activism through voting.

Maegan Carberry, a representative from Rock the Vote, said she is afraid the proposed amendment would make it impossible for some young people to vote.

"Even if it happened to one person," she said, "that would be distressing."

James agreed with Helfand that this current issue is tied to the civil rights movement depicted in the film.

"This is kind of the same idea," he told his students, "but it's not so much of a race issue — but what?"

He paused and looked around the room for a moment before answering the question: "Age."

James said he plans to incorporate "The Barber of Birmingham" into efforts to teach his students to debate using the voter ID issue. He will also use it to kick-start the class discussion of the civil

rights movement, which they will be starting in class soon. Helfand said she hopes to continue working with schools and "use Hickman as a model."

Helfand said she was moved while seeing the film with a classroom of mixed-raced students because of its relevance to them and what they were learning in class.

"I've never seen that movie in a classroom before," she said, "and it was just very compelling in a radically different way."