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St. Croix Filmmaker To Screen First Short Film In Pennsylvania: 'ANIMALS' Explores Themes of Race, Belonging, and Identity

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On the set of ANIMALS. By. JORDAN K. PAUL

St. Croix native Jordan K. Paul is receiving buzz for his new short film "ANIMALS", which has been accepted for screening at the Black Bottom Film Festival in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

ANIMALS tells the story of a young black man from the USVI who endures a racist encounter with the Los Angeles Police Department after his white roommate instigates a violent altercation. The encounter leads to a transformative journey which works to expose flaws in the American policing system.

"I had to show people the perspective of someone coming in from outside of the United States," said Mr. Paul during an interview with CBC News, saying that this point of view was often missing from the narrative. "I feel like we have to tell it now, or else it's not gonna be told."

The film's "outsider" perspective is one reflected by Mr. Paul's own life story. "The entire film is deeply influenced by my personal experiences, and it's my way of sharing my unique perspective," said the filmmaker, who moved to LA about a decade ago to pursue his passion.

Although the story is a deeply personal one for Mr. Paul, Virgin Islanders both at home and on the mainland will be able to connect with the familiar scenes and locations of the opening sequence, which was shot back on St. Croix. Some may even recognize familiar faces, as Mr. Paul cast two Virgin Islands actors in the film - Rafa'el Jadon Munroe plays a young Jordan (the name of the movie's protagonist), and the filmmaker's sister Sydney Paul plays Jordan's mother.

Mr. Paul, who, apart from his directorial debut, has other film credits as an actor and crewmember, says that it was challenging to break into the industry coming from the USVI where at least in 2013 when he started his journey, the film industry was "virtually non-existent." However, years of networking and working in various roles on a movie set prepared him for the challenge of directing a film. Despite the hurdles he had to clear along the way, Mr. Paul says that growing up on St. Croix prepared him well for the task. The island's culture "instilled in me the right personality for networking and making my mark in the industry," Mr. Paul told Consortium journalists. The unique perspective of a Virgin Islander, however, is the most important thing he can bring to the table, Mr. Paul believes. "This perspective is what I believe resonates most with audiences through my short film," he says, outlining plans to continue mining this rich vein in future projects.

Thinking back to his time as a young Virgin Islander yearning for the chance to bring his ideas to life on screen, Mr. Paul had one crucial message for other youngsters in the territory with similar aspirations. "It doesn't matter how small the place you come from is, as long as you have a clear dream and goal, nothing can stop you," he advised, urging young people to "keep swimming hard" in the proverbial small pond, so that when they are "ready to jump into the ocean, [they'll] be the strongest fish to emerge." He noted that advances in technology make the barriers to filmmaking less severe. "Anyone can start making films with the phone in their pocket," Mr. Paul asserted.

The East Coast premiere of ANIMALS is scheduled for October 29 at 2:10 p.m. in the main theater of the August Wilson African American Cultural Center. After the screening, audiences will engage with Mr. Paul during a Q&A session.