



FIGHTING TO BE HEARD

A homemade pan of lasagna saved his documentary.

For nine years, Department of Media Studies Professor Matthew Barr spent weekends traveling to Tar Heel, North Carolina. There he filmed “Union Time – Fighting for Workers’ Rights,” about the 16-year struggle of workers to organize the world’s largest pork processing plant.

Shortly after their victory, Barr’s project unexpectedly ran into trouble. He had cultivated relationships with Smithfield Packing Co. slaughterhouse employees and United Food and Commercial Workers organizers, but one of his primary interview subjects and a leader in the fight suddenly didn’t want to be filmed anymore.

It took Barr’s culinary talents to win her over.



THE REAL STORY Barr spent nine years filming workers of the Smithfield Foods pork processing plant. “It is history told by the people who made it.”

As Barr had gotten to know the workers, he learned that she liked a dish that happened to be one of his favorites. “I made a big pan of lasagna and drove it down to the union headquarters,” he says. “I understood the personal pressure that these workers were under. I wanted to show that I cared about them, and that it wasn’t ‘just a story.’”

The personal approach paid off. She resumed her participation in the film and, thanks to her influence and Barr’s persistence, others stepped forward too.

Barr trimmed 170 hours of footage into what he calls “86 minutes of oral history and documentary” for the film’s premiere at UNCG in 2016. The final product, narrated by actor and activist Danny Glover, explores what Barr calls a “David versus Goliath” story.

“It depicts the atmosphere of injury and intimidation that prevailed at the Tar Heel plant,” says Barr. Fear of losing their jobs deterred many workers from openly participating in union efforts.

“It shows the courage of the workers who fought for a union, and how working conditions improved when — after two failed attempts — they finally succeeded.”

Barr has presented the film at the headquarters of the National Labor Relations Board in Washington, D.C., universities including Cornell University and UCLA, organized labor conferences, festivals, and churches. This summer he plans to produce hour-long and half-hour versions aimed at the

education market, union-training programs, and organizing drives.

“The film’s message of solidarity resonates with many audiences,” says Barr. “African American, Hispanic, Lumbee, and white workers came together, and that is very powerful.”

“Union Time” is the latest product of Barr’s nonprofit, the Unheard Voices Project, which produces documentaries about working people facing challenges of globalization and economic upheaval. Other films include “Wild Caught,” about the troubles of a fishing community in Sneads Ferry, North Carolina, and “With These Hands,” a look at the struggling U.S. furniture industry through the closing of the Hooker Furniture factory in Martinsville, Virginia.

Barr had always wanted to produce a documentary about a union and was excited when an acquaintance introduced him to the Smithfield campaign. Two UNCG grants totaling \$10,000 funded his early work on “Union Time,” while \$85,000 from individuals, including relatives, enabled him to complete the project.

“To me, making this film was a huge act of faith,” Barr says.

“I believe it tells an important story. It is history told by the people who made it.”

By Chris Burritt • Photography by Mike Dickens, illustration from “Union Time” by Alexis Rodriguez
Learn more at <https://go.uncg.edu/barr>