



Bolivar County's weekly source for community news.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 12, 2023



Peyton James and Mariano Sifuentes on the film set with Ben Powell, Glenn Payne, Jaiden Nix and Jonarious (Jay) Lee.



Members of the community came out in full force to watch the premiere of the student film, Help Wanted.

# Sunflower County Film Academy

## Student's premiere draws big crowd to Ellis Theater

Special to *The Bolivar Bullet*

It was standing room only at the historic Ellis Theatre on Friday, June 30, as residents of Cleveland and other communities came out to watch the premiere of "Help Wanted," a short film produced by high school students from the Sunflower County Film Academy (SCFA).

The film, which looked more like an afterschool special rather than a first-time effort by inexperienced high school students, is about a troubled teen who forms an unexpected bond when he befriends a gruff old man in a story about friendship, growth and finding one's place in the world.

The film students, most of whom attend Cleveland Central High School, took part in the free summer workshop which is part of the K-12 curriculum for Fannie Lou Hamer's America, an educational project that honors the late Mississippi Delta-sharecropper-turned-civil and voting rights advocate.

The four-week workshop began on June 5 and was hosted by the Delta Arts Alliance. Under the direction of instructors and independent filmmakers Ben Powell of Broken Arm Studio and Glenn Payne of Dead Leaf Productions, the students started production on the film the first week of class.

"I didn't expect to see all the equipment so fast," said Zariah

Burl, a senior at Cleveland Central. "For some reason, I expected us all to be at a school in a classroom in like groups of four. But it felt like we were an actual movie crew. It was something you wouldn't expect from a place like Cleveland."

"We really wanted the students to get the full experience of creating a film," said Payne. "During the first week they helped make adjustments to the script, as well as being a part of the auditions and planning process. The second and third weeks they received hands-on training as they filmed on set while doing various jobs such as running cameras, operating sound equipment, lighting scenes, and even acting. In our final week, the class got a taste of the post-production process with editing, color grading and sound mixing. It's really amazing how much they took part in in just one short month."

Among those who attended the free screening were the students' parents, grandparents, and friends, as well as Central District Transportation Commissioner Willie Simmons, who interacted with Fannie Lou Hamer prior to her death in 1977.

"Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer is a lady who is too often overlooked or unknown even by the citizens here in the Delta and Sunflower and Bolivar Counties where she walked and did many things to help plan for and prepare for the



Student Peyton James, his mother, Latasha Patton and MDOT Commissioner Willie Simmons after the screening of Help Wanted.

opportunities that exist today," said Simmons. "So, when I realized this was a tribute to her and her legacy and we had young folks involved and actually doing the filming, it was just overwhelming for me to want to be involved in that because of the impact she had on this community and the country as a whole. She put in place a stairway for many of us and where

FILM ACADEMY continued on page A11

## BLAST TO THE PAST



Overton Square in Memphis, late 1970s



Repairing a tire on a road near Knowlton Plantation in Perthshire, October 1939

**FILM ACADEMY**  
Continued from Page A9

we are today.”  
The 20-minute film ended with a standing ovation from the audience and a question-and-answer session with the students. When asked how many planned to pursue a career in the film industry, all of the students said they would.  
“I really enjoyed the class,

and I would like to be a producer or an actor,” said Merion Turner, a freshman at Drew High School.

“I’d like to learn more about the equipment and how to operate them and even act in a film myself,” said Cleveland Central Freshman Jaiden Nix. “I want to continue filmmaking because I loved the appearance of the film and how it looked like an actual movie.”

Simmons said there are opportunities in the film industry for these students whether in front of the camera or behind. “These young folks had the opportunity to see all of that and it’s creating a whole new set of goals for them in the way of a career,” he said. “We see stories being told. And oftentimes they are being told by individuals who are not associated with the community. But these young

kids, who are so intelligent and so talented, they acted like professionals who had been doing this for some time. So, my challenge would be to utilize them and assist them in getting into other activities that would keep that fire burning so they will land a job within the film industry.”

Powell and Payne plan to submit “Help Wanted” to several film festivals locally and nationally inviting the

students to attend.  
“I was extremely proud of each and every student,” said Payne. “We really pushed them to get outside of their comfort zones and try something new, while also trying to show the importance of not just doing the job but doing your very best at it. There was real talent on display from those young people. I hope they continue to explore the artistic and professional rewards of








working in the field and I look forward to seeing what they do next.”

The trailer and photos from the film and workshop will soon be posted on [www.fannielouhamersamerica.com/sunflower-county-film-academy](http://www.fannielouhamersamerica.com/sunflower-county-film-academy).

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