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Erik Brady: A life that began in segregated Mississippi and a friendship forged in Buffalo births art for our time

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LeRoi Johnson and Tarabu Kirkland at Burchfield Penney Art Center for Johnson's new exhibit.
Photo by Justin Barker

[Erik Brady](#)

Mamie Kirkland's son will screen his documentary about her Thursday night at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, where the new exhibit "LeRoi: Living in Color" is on display. It's a match made in heaven.

Which is only fitting, since that's where she resides these days.

LeRoi Johnson and Tarabu Betserai Kirkland have been friends for more than 60 years, since they met as middle schoolers at the Masten Avenue Boys Club. Now Johnson is a Buffalo attorney who styles his colorful paintings as "electric primitive," and Kirkland is a film documentarian in Los Angeles whose "[100 Years From Mississippi](#)" tells Mamie's story. When she died, in 2019, at age 111, she was Buffalo's oldest citizen. And maybe its most beloved.



And she would serve up stories while she cooked. Mamie Kirkland's life story describes the arc of the African American experience in the 20th century: Born in Ellisville, Miss., in 1908. Fled when she was 7 because her father would have been lynched if the family had stayed. In adulthood, raised nine children in Buffalo. Lived through the horrors of her age – and somehow transcended them by the force of her will.

She reluctantly visited Ellisville – with Tarabu and his cameras – 100 years later to confront the ghosts of American racial terrorism. The film is so powerful because she was. And now, given the murders at the Tops supermarket six months ago, her son's award-winning film carries ever more meaning and moral weight.

"My mother and her family left Mississippi when her father was going to be lynched," Kirkland says. "And here we are, 100 years later, and we have domestic terrorism only blocks from where my mother lived, where we grew up, where we walked the streets as young men."

Mamie's story connects with the themes of the Black Lives Matter portion of "LeRoi: Living in Color." Johnson and Kirkland will talk about that Thursday night at a panel discussion following the documentary, which begins at 7. (And on Monday at 9 p.m., you can see "100 Years From Mississippi" on WNED-TV.)

"This is as natural a fit as there is," Johnson says of pairing his exhibit with his friend's film.

"When the idea came up, it was a natural collaboration," Kirkland says. "We both came up in this city and this community and this intellectual environment. Roi has gone on to accomplish great things as an attorney and as an artist. And here I am showing this film, which I released last year and has gone on to great acclaim. Our points of progress have converged at this point."

"LeRoi: Living in Color" includes works from across his five decades as an artist. "It tells the story of my life," he says. "It's my life on canvas."

He has put on shows internationally from South America to Europe to Canada, but this is his first major exhibit in Buffalo. “This one means more to me than all the other exhibitions taken together,” Johnson says. “There’s no place like home, as Dorothy said.” Kirkland seconds that emotion. He screened [“100 Years”](#) at the North Park Theatre a year ago as part of the Buffalo International Film Festival. At that point he had not been back home since his mother’s funeral.

Mamie fled Mississippi because of racial terrorism. She made a life in Buffalo. And then, not long after we lost her, terrorism that [authorities have said was committed by a white supremacist](#) visited her old neighborhood.

“I think if she were here today she would say, ‘This story is not over,’ ” her son says. “This is not something that happened 100 years ago and it’s gone and you don’t have to think about it anymore. Folks who have been members of marginalized communities our entire lives, we understand our history often doesn’t get told. And that erasure is very powerful. She would say, ‘You go out there and do what you can to change the world and make it a better place.’ ”

The boys who met at the Boys Club 60-some years ago do that every day. Come out to Burchfield Penney and see for yourself.

