

Arts &  
Entertainment

# THE SUNDAY NEWS & OBSERVER

## Their town

Friends find community in 'Corapeake'

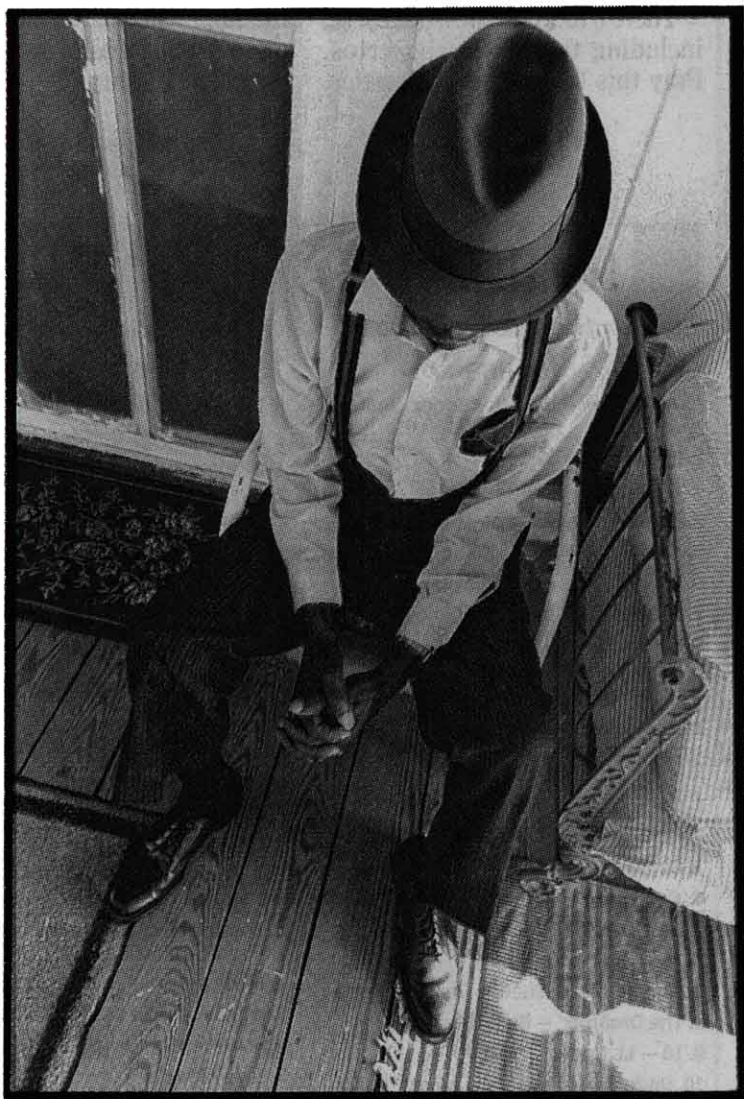
BY TODD LOTHERY  
STAFF WRITER

**B**renda Parker Hunt spent the first nine years of her life in Corapeake, a tiny community near the North Carolina-Virginia state line. The place was called Orapeake until the local post office misspelled it and the new name stuck.

This hamlet is an unremarkable place, a sparsely populated slab of farmland inhabited by a few hundred people and bordered to the east by the forested wetlands known as the Great Dismal Swamp. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of communities very much like it all across America. But to Hunt, there's no place on Earth like it.

"The happiest time I can remember was when I was 7," she says. "I really thought Corapeake was the only place in the world." When she moved to Philadelphia, many in her large, extended family remained in Corapeake. So did her heart, and perhaps a part of her soul.

Kendall Messick understands the precious, timeless quality of Corapeake that keeps pulling Hunt



The documentary 'Corapeake' is a warm and eloquent portrait of the residents in a small community in northeastern North Carolina.

TUNE IN

'Corapeake' airs tonight at 6 on UNC-TV.



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## TOWN

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back. Messick, a New Jersey photographer, made a documentary that captures something extraordinary in this ordinary crossroads. Largely composed of still photographs and interviews with the town's elderly, African-American residents, "Corapeake" draws us into the community. As we listen to the stories — by 104-year-old Eley Otelia Demiel, who has outlived two husbands and a son, and Jessie Mae Goodman, whose mother had 11 children and whose grandmother had 19 — we begin to understand this place whose very unremarkableness might be exactly what makes it remarkable.

"Corapeake" emerged from an unlikely friendship — between Messick and Hunt, who was the documentary's catalyst. They met in 1986 at Wake Forest University, where Messick tutored Hunt in Spanish. Messick is white and male. Hunt is black, female and 17 years older. Despite their differences, they became close friends.

And Hunt just would not stop talking about her hometown.

"Finally I said, 'When are you going to take me to Corapeake?' " Messick said. "And when we went for the first time, in 1995, I started taking tons of pictures. I was so taken by the faces of the people and the landscapes. The images just presented themselves to me — that's the only way I can put it. And once I started to meet folks there, I felt like it was really important to preserve their stories."

Messick didn't go to Corapeake intending to make a film. A native of Delaware who has lived most of his life in Philadelphia and the New York area, he graduated from Wake Forest with a degree in Spanish and Latin-American studies. He then spent 13 years working for a telecommunications company before deciding to dedicate his life full time to his true passion: photography.

His first trip to Corapeake inspired more

trips. Soon he was driving down from the Northeast seven or eight times a year, taking pictures of and recording interviews with Hunt's parents, aunts and uncles, as well as most of the townspeople.

"He's very upbeat," Hunt says. "He has a real zest for life, and he's the kind of person who doesn't take no for an answer. He would plop himself down in the middle of my family and call himself a member of the family, not caring at all that he was the only white person there. He's been calling my mother and father 'Mom and Dad' for years. People accepted him unconditionally. They couldn't wait for him to come — they would make him biscuits and fried chicken. He could walk into any store in town and they knew his name."

When Messick and Hunt realized they had the makings of a documentary, they hired a cinematographer from Mississippi to shoot footage of Corapeake, as well as scenes of Hunt driving through town, which they used as a motif and connecting thread between the still photos and the residents' voice-over anecdotes. They also hired an editor from Mississippi, which meant that the indefatigable Messick, who made about 40 trips to Corapeake for the film, made several trips to Mississippi for post-production.

The process took six years, but the finished product is a thing of beauty, elegance and eloquence — a warm, honest portrait of the town, thematically rich and tinged with nostalgia. Messick's poetic



'I wanted to present the intimate histories of these people,' says filmmaker Kendall Messick.

photographs and the alternately humorous and poignant stories are embellished by slide-guitar music by bluesman John Hammond, who happens to be Messick's neighbor.

"Like a lot of art projects, this had a life of its own, if you will," Messick said. "And as I was working on it, I naturally started to wonder what it was about these people, their stories and this town that really grabbed me. And it became apparent that the stories were resonant of my grandfather's stories. He came from Western North Carolina, and we still have family reunions down there. He was the storyteller to end all storytellers, and when I was growing up, I was his captive listener, at his knee taking in every word."

The Corapeake that Hunt has known all her life is, like everything else, changing. Many of the people who appear in the documentary died during filming or afterward,

including some members of Hunt's family. People aren't as quick to invite somebody into their homes.

But change comes slowly to a place like Corapeake, so it's still much the same as it was when Hunt, 55, was a child. Though she lives in Philadelphia, where she works as a counselor and assistant professor at the Community College of Philadelphia, she still gets back to Corapeake once in a while.

"It's the place I go to get quiet," Hunt says. "It gives you permission to not be perfect. Nobody cares what kind of car you drive, what kind of house you live in, how much money you have. It's perfectly OK to just sit in a chair and fall asleep."

Hunt says it's not so much the community that has changed as the residents' perception of the community.

"When they saw the documentary, they were just flabbergasted," Hunt says. "Before they saw it they looked at Corapeake as just the place where they lived, but after, Corapeake became less a place than an idea of a place. Kendall tapped into this connectedness, and they realized that we were documenting their history and acknowledging their importance to one another, which, in a way, I don't think they had ever considered."

Like Hunt, Messick, 38, still makes occasional trips to Corapeake. He says the townspeople's reaction to the film was exactly the type of reaction he hoped to elicit.

"I wanted to present the intimate histories of these people — experiences that, regardless of race, mirrored experiences that other people have had," he says. "I wanted to subtly speak about the humanity of all of us. Making the film led me back to my own family and my own history, and judging from the feedback I've gotten from viewers, seeing it has done the same for them. When you hear that — I mean, that's why you do it."

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