Spirit Leads My Needle: The Big Chiefs of Carnival

Purpose
Students worked with faculty and a filmmaker to create a moving documentary that captures the artistry and resilience of New Orleans’ Mardi Gras Indians, fighting to preserve a 150-year-old neighborhood parading tradition. Each year African American practitioners “mask Indian” by appearing on the streets in elaborate, hand sewn suits of the finest beads and feathers, confronting other tribes in ritualistic encounters that involve chanting, dancing and competition for the “prettiest” suits.

Impact
The documentary captures the artistic genius, stamina and resourcefulness of the chiefs and queens of New Orleans and the power of cultural traditions to create community bonds.

The PBS affiliate in New Orleans aired the documentary during Mardi Gras 2016 and because of positive response plans to show it every year.

Students gained experience in filmmaking, deepened their knowledge of African American history, received grants to continue their research, and presented their work at local and national conferences.

How you can get involved:
- Donate to the Mardi Gras Indian Council and Queens of the Nation
- Air film in classes and at community events

To get involved, contact:
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