

Lore of Carnival Indian Queens

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Students taking a course in feminist documentation and new media are documenting a centuries-old New Orleans tradition in the African-American community. Using digital cameras, they are recording Mardi Gras Indian queens.



Dressed in brilliant costumes, the Young Guardians of the Flame Mardi Gras Indian tribe emerges from a home in Musicians Village for the tribe's annual Carnival procession. (Photos by Fran Simon)

Early Mardi Gras morning (Feb. 5) this year, Betsy Weiss, adjunct assistant professor in the [communication department](#), led students to the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans to find the Young Guardians of the Flame Mardi Gras Indians at a house in the Musicians Village.

The queen of the tribe emerged, chanting a traditional song and beating a tambourine. Grinning boys and girls dressed in fiery costumes with orange and red plumage followed her.

The student documentarians followed the tribe on its meandering route through the Treme neighborhood to Congo Square and St. Louis Cemetery No. 3.

“It was our first time shooting,” says Grace Strother, a sophomore math major from Boston and one of four students operating digital cameras and sound equipment that day. “I think we got a little bit, but it was hard to keep steady while we were walking, so some [of the footage] is shaky.”

Strother says that the communication course appealed to her because it fulfills part of the [public-service](#) graduation requirement. This weekend (March 8 and 9), students in the class also will interview people in Mardi Gras Indian tribes and others who are knowledgeable about the tradition.

“We want to show strong, beautiful women in positions of power, who are doing important things,” Strother says, noting that the Mardi Gras Indian queens pass



Weiss, a professional documentary

filmmaker, says that the term “feminist” is not one that resonates with the current generation of students ? they consider the term a bit old-fashioned.

Nevertheless, Weiss says, “I’m hoping that [the students in the class] will learn technical skills and learn how to report other people’s experience from a feminist perspective, rather than from an authoritarian viewpoint.”

She hopes that the students’ documentary will be screened in conjunction with the

upcoming [V to the Tenth event](#) in New Orleans April 11â€“12, the 10th anniversary of V-Day, the global movement to end violence against women and girls through benefit productions of playwright/founder Eve Ensler's award-winning play *The Vagina Monologues*.

Working with V-Day, the Katrina Warriors Network is organizing local events in the weeks leading up to the celebration.

In addition, Cherice Harrison-Nelson of the Guardians of the Flame tribe has plans to show the documentary at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival April 25â€“May 4.