

The News

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Kingstree native to produce documentary uncovering civil rights figure McSween

SUBMITTED NEWS

Justin O. Cooper, a 1998 graduate of Kingstree Senior High School, readies his debut feature-length film, *PAN-AM: The Untold Legacy of Cirilo McSween*, in which he uncovers the remarkable story of Cirilo McSween, whose strategic alliances and advocacy contributed to the course of history across the Americas.



Cooper

Cooper, the son of local photographer Thelbert A. Cooper and Joan D. Hampton, a former officer at the Kingstree Police Department, will meticulously trace McSween's extraordinary journey. From his humble beginnings as an impoverished student-athlete in the barrios of Panama City, Panama, to his groundbreaking integration into the workforce of a major US insurance company as one of the first Afro-Latinos in the '50s. His path led him to forge alliances with iconic figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., and to champion the cause of equality during the Civil Rights Movement in the '60s. His passionate advocacy for Panama during the pivotal Torrijos-Carter Treaty negotiations of the '70s and beyond is a testament to his unwavering commitment to justice and equality.

Now based in Los Angeles, Cooper's production company JOCMedia & Entertainment is producing *PAN-AM* with Brittany DeVries, head of Seedling Media Productions, a Panamanian company to bring this cross-border co-production to life with director Mariel Garcia Spooner, tentatively slated to direct the riveting documentary that will include rare archival footage, exclusive interviews with a few surviving civil rights activists along with the personal tales of McSween's heirs—his grandson, son, and godson—*PAN-AM* will deliver a comprehensive exploration of McSween's multifaceted legacy.

The filmmakers, raising capital to go into production this summer, are working with Los Angeles-based Film Independent's Fiscal Sponsorship Program, which opens the door to nonprofit funding for independent filmmakers and media artists and invites public support through 100% tax-deductible donations as they embark on bringing another hidden figure to light.

The filmmaking trio's collaboration is



PHOTO PROVIDED.

McSween with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson.

based on their respective experience and successes. Cooper currently consults as the North American Liaison for The Royal Film Commission—Jordan, providing film incentive and logistical physical production support promoting filming in the Kingdom of Jordan; projects he's supported include *Star Wars: Ep. 9—The Rise of Skywalker*, *Dune*, and *SEAL Team*. As a producer, DeVries' award-winning work includes documentaries *Dear Panama* and *A World Without Orphans* along with crime/thriller *Chacalera*, premiering in Panamanian theaters on April 18. Spooner's debut feature film, *Algo Azul*, was acquired by HBOMax for the U.S. market and Prime Video for Latin America. To date, their collective effort for *PAN-AM* was a 2023 selection at the Central American and Caribbean Film and Audiovisual Market (MAUCC) in Costa Rica.

Reflecting on the collaboration, Cooper states, "Embarking on an independent film project often presents a labyrinth of hurdles. However, the spirit of unity is epitomized by the African proverb, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together,' galvanized my partnership with Brittany. This alliance, fortified by our collaboration with Film Independent, is key to unveiling Cirilo McSween's remarkable narrative. We encourage public participation in bringing this story to light through the support of *PAN-AM* via Film Independent."

Brittany DeVries adds, "Crafting

PAN-AM: The Untold Legacy of Cirilo McSween has been an exploration into the essence of cross-cultural narratives that bridge divides. This documentary is a powerful narrative of justice, resilience, and equality, highlighting McSween's legacy as a beacon of hope and unity. Our joint endeavor emphasizes the impact of collaborative storytelling in inspiring change and fostering understanding across cultures."

Tapping into the zeitgeist of revealing untold stories of marginalized subjects who have shaped history, *PAN-AM* follows the resounding successes of scripted features spotlighting the lives of Bayard Rustin in *Rustin* and Shirley Chisholm in *Shirley*, further excavating the richness of underrepresented historical figures and will broaden the scope and understanding of McSween's contributions to social justice across the Americas.

PAN-AM: The Untold Legacy of Cirilo McSween is set to enrich the cinematic landscape, celebrating the unsung heroes who've paved the way yet remained in the shadows. This documentary calls to acknowledge and appreciate the rich mosaic of stories that shape our collective history.

For more information, to view the film's sizzle reel, to offer support, and to make a tax-deductible donation to *PAN-AM*, please visit Film Independent's sponsored projects page at film-independent.org/sponsored-projects/pan-am.