

Interview: Rodney Walker of 'Ten9Eight' on the American Dream

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- [Competition](#) [2]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [3]
- [Inner City](#) [4]
- [Interview](#) [5]
- [Mary Mazzio](#) [6]
- [Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship](#) [7]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [8]
- [Rodney Walker](#) [9]
- [Steve Mariotti](#) [10]
- [Ten9Eight](#) [11]

CHICAGO – With U.S. high school dropout rates at epic proportions, the new documentary “Ten9Eight” highlights a teaching program and competition for poorer, immigrant and at-risk students. One of those students is Chicagoan Rodney Walker.

“Ten9Eight: Shoot for the Moon” is the full title of the film directed by Mary Mazzio, that is getting a special nationwide screening through the AMC Theater chain in eight cities through November 19th. The film documents inner city high school students in competition, as they go through the steps leading up to the finals of the annual business plan contest sponsored by the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE).

Rodney Walker, a Chicago native, was one of the finalists in the NFTE competition, which pits high school students from all over the country to present goods and services as viable businesses. Walker started a wedding video/music business, another contestant has vegetarian dog treats and yet another makes photosensitive football masks. It not only involves the business or product itself, but all the mechanics and dollar estimates that the competitors put before a panel of expert judges.



Rodney Walker and Business Partner Gabriel Echoles in 'Ten9Eight'
Photo credit: Richard Schultz for 50 Eggs Films

HollywoodChicago talked to Rodney Walker, who also narrates the film, about his particular journey within the competition and why his difficult childhood actually inspired him to create a better life for himself.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think this film will accomplish regarding inspiring people who will see it?

Rodney Walker: For the most part, this film will show other kids from all places that there is power in being an entrepreneur, and what that can do. And how that entrepreneurial power can influence education. It stresses building a business and how that can effect a future.

HC: Describe your relationship with director Mary Mazzio. How did she keep the cameras out of your way and why did she choose you to

narrate the film?

RW: I never asked her personally why she chose me (laughs), but it was a privilege. She first met me in Chicago when I placed first in the citywide competition for the NFTE. She was profiling the presentations. So I suppose she chose me because I have a great sense in my presentations and that would serve a purpose for the film.

HC: What specifically did you learn from talking to the judges in the entrepreneurial competition finals about the realities of the business you presented?

RW: Pertaining to my business and their feedback I was privileged to make it to finals. I didn't expect it, or even close to it. There wasn't as much innovation in my business, it is a video production business. It was something that I presented passionately because it is what I love to do.

HC: As a videographer yourself, what did you learn about shooting footage and composing a movie through your experience in Ten9Eight?

RW: The more I produced videos for the purpose of my business plan, the better I got at it. That really help me further develop my skills as a video producer.

HC: Describe your relationship with your business partner, Gabe Echoles. How did it develop from a friendship to using his music as a basis for your business?

RW: I didn't feel video production was enough to propel me in the competition, until I thought of a way to specialize it. At the same time, Gabe wanted to specialize his music side. So he felt the best way to do that was with video and I thought it would be with music. That's how we developed the business.

HC: You describe yourself as a scholar. Who or what inspired you to move past your difficult childhood and seek education as an alternative to create a better life?

RW: It came from me understanding that education is the foundation to my life, it is the single most determining factor as to how far I will go. The NFTE inspired me and helped me recognize that.

I could have not made it through the competitions without the feeling of importance, that I was at the center of things. When you feel like that, it gives you a sense of motivation. It gives you the feeling of 'I can do this.' And if I could do good in this, I can do good in anything.



Director Mary Mazzio of 'Ten9Eight'
Photo credit: Richard Schultz for 50 Eggs Films

HC: At 20 years old you have lived a lifetime of experiences that people three times your age can't even imagine. How do you think that will prepare you for the next stage in your life?

RW: My mentor has always told me that one day my struggles will prepare me for greatness. He also emphasized staying humble your experiences and learning from your experiences.

HC: How do you connect with the early civil rights struggles of 50 years ago and do you think that America will ever become a "post-racial"

country?

RW: America will be as racist as we make it. The more you focus on something, the more it will come to you, I strongly believe in this fact. The more you try to avoid something, the faster it will come right back at you. If you focus on the positive things, if you emphasize the positive things, that is what will come about. As it relates to civil rights and the movements, instead of keeping the war we've got to make peace with the solutions. That is how we will bring about true change.

HC: With your entrepreneurial background, how are you approaching college differently than the other kids in your class?

RW: I think what I do differently is that when I'm faced with challenges and when I'm faced with expectations, I always have this willingness to overcome all my obstacles and challenges. I am very patient, with a sense of patience as I work through college and my education.

HC: How did the election of Barack Obama effect your friends and family? What surprised you most about his election and about President Obama as man?

RW: The history is compelling and motivational. It showed my family and friends how far we have come as a nation. But for their own progress it didn't do too much for them. It didn't do anything.

The fact that an individual can go through so much human struggle and still be a success is what inspired me most about President Barack Obama.

"Ten9Eight: Shoot for the Moon" has a limited release in eight cities at AMC Theaters through November 19th. [Click here for participating theaters and DVD information.](#) [12] Featuring Rodney Walker, Jessica Cervantes, Macalee Harris and Amanda Loyola, directed by Mary Mazzio.



[13]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
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