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‘Who are these people whose votes weren’t counted?’

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Jamaica Plain resident honed her skills at a Fox News station. As an activist, the award-winning documentary producer honed her skills at Greenpeace. “I was climbing a building, hanging a banner and getting arrested in Atlanta one day,” says Greenberg. “The next day, I’m at the John Hancock building in my corporate attire making contacts in the corporate video-production world.”

Greenberg’s film “94 Years and 1 Nursing Home Later” won three Best Documentary awards at film festivals in 2000. Next Sunday, Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts will premiere another of Greenberg’s films, “Trouble in Paradise,” which depicts the impact of Election Day 2000 on Floridians.

Florida was central in the hotly contested presidential race between Al Gore and George Bush. With hanging chads, confusing ballots, and charges of racial discrimination, Democrats wanted a recount; Republicans, with Bush ahead by 537 votes, did not. Soon the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq turned attention elsewhere for most people. But not for Greenberg.

“Who are these people whose votes weren’t counted?” she recalls thinking.

From 2000 to 2002, Greenberg chronicled the activism of five newly politicized Floridians.

One of them, Deidre Newton, set up a get-out-the-vote phone bank in her West Palm Beach realty office on Election Day. The phone bank became a crisis line: People from poorer African American communities called in, complaining about polling places moved without notice, voter names disappearing from the eligible voter list, and threats of arrest.

“I was up all night,” Newton says in an interview.

On Inauguration Day, Newton found herself in Washington, D.C., on a stage addressing 5,000 protesters. “I was on a reserve speaker list,” Newton told Greenberg in the documentary. “When one speaker didn’t show, they said ‘You’re in.’”

“See what happens when you take a bus trip to Washington, D.C.? It changes your life,” she says now.

Soon Greenberg was in Florida documenting Newton’s work with Myrtle Rains, 69, who presided over the town of Belle Glade’s Democratic Club. Belle Glade’s median household income in 2000 was \$22,000, its population 50 percent African American. Rains tells of the town’s large voter turnout in 2000 – when many voters were confused by the ballots. A Palm Beach Post analysis showed that in Belle Glade, “23 percent of voters had ballots tossed because they either didn’t vote for president or punched more than one hole in the presidential race.”

Between the 2000 and 2002 elections, Rains says she repeatedly requested help from the Democratic Party. Despite her best efforts, during the gubernatorial election in 2002, polling sites in Belle Glade were moved without notice.

“We are the forgotten people out here,” Rains told Greenberg. “I say that so often.”

Meanwhile Newton campaigned for Floridian Larry Winawer, another activist in Greenberg’s documentary. The 2000 election transformed Winawer from teacher to Democratic candidate for Palm Beach County Commissioner. “Politics permeates everything,” he says in an interview. “You can either put yourself into it or not.”

Activist Bob Kunst, Greenberg’s fourth subject, decided to dive in; he ran for governor on the platform of the “Stolen Election.” Although he lost, Kunst says he drew 42,000 votes on a \$17,000 budget and no media coverage.

Greenberg’s fifth character is an African American ex-felon turned pastor named Thomas Johnson. His right to vote had been restored in New York, but when he moved to Florida, poll workers turned him away. Johnson became the lead plaintiff in a class action lawsuit to reinstate the voting rights of 620,000 ex-felons. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University represents them. Florida restored Johnson’s vote, but the Brennan Center released a report June 8 that states “thousands who have had their voting rights restored may remain on Florida purge lists.”

Greenberg’s film poses the question: “What about Election Day 2004?”

“There’s a sense from the film that every individual has to be vigilant about the voting system,” says Greenberg. “I think that’s the important legacy of Election 2000.”