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## USC News

# A documentary with the power to save lives

By Vincent Lim

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*Hole in the Head: A Life Revealed*, an award-winning documentary that tells the shocking and inspiring life story of Vertus Hardiman — the victim of a horrifying medical experiment — was presented by the [USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging](#) and [Visions and Voices](#).

Karen Lincoln, associate professor at the USC School of Social Work and associate director of the Roybal Institute, organized the event to start a conversation about the travesties that have occurred in the name of research, particularly among African-American participants in medical studies.

“This is a university where we engage in a variety of different types of research,” said moderator William Vega, Provost Professor and executive director of the Roybal Institute. “What this film brings to the forefront is the critical issue of seriously becoming more aware — for people engaging in research and initiating research and who have a vested interest in research going forward and being successful — to always be mindful of what they’re involved in and what’s at stake for everyone.”

*Hole in the Head* describes the circumstances in which Hardiman and nine other children from Lyles Station, Ind., were experimented on with radiation at a county hospital in 1927.

The documentary reports that the experiment was misrepresented as a cure for the scalp fungus known as ringworm, when in reality, it was merely the lure used to gain access to innocents whose unsuspecting obliging parents signed permission slips for the treatment. The tragic experiment had severe physical complications for Hardiman — namely a cruelly irradiated and malformed head, with an actual hole in his skull.

It took two decades before Hardiman would share his story with his confidant — writer/producer Wilbert Smith — finally revealing the secret he concealed under a wig and beanie for nearly 80 years.

“For 20 years, he never once said: ‘I had a headache.’” Smith said during a Q-and-A session following the screening. “He stood next to me in our church choir, and I never knew.”

Partnering with writer/director Brett Leonard — perhaps best known for directing and co-writing *The Lawnmower Man* — Smith became an author and filmmaker expressly to tell his friend’s story of survival and resilience.

“The gift that Wilbert [Smith] and Vertus Hardiman brought to me was to be able to tell a story so far beyond what you could imagine in fiction,” Leonard said.

Despite the cancer Hardiman eventually developed as a consequence of the experiment, he communicates the value of sincere forgiveness throughout the film and declares that he harbors no ill will toward those who experimented on him.

“This film is not intended to be some condemnation of medical experimentation,” Smith said. “This is a story of a man who was able to live life on his terms in spite of the hand that he was dealt.”

Smith and Leonard told the audience that future plans for their project involve turning it into a feature film and incorporating it into curriculum as an educational tool for schools and colleges.

“Brett [Leonard] and I don’t see anything else on the horizon that has the power to change lives,” Smith said. “This has that power.”



*Hole in the Head: A Life Revealed* recounts a frightening medical experiment. (Photo/Courtesy of Visions and Voices)