

Alumna profile for *Metro Magazine*, alumni magazine for Metropolitan State College of Denver. Fall 2004 issue. Copyright 2004 Metropolitan State College of Denver

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## **Ashara Ekundayo** **“If You’re Passionate About It, Show Me”**

By Julie Lancaster

It started out as a monthly night of independent film and poetry in Denver’s Five Points neighborhood. It has evolved into a nationally broadcast cable TV show with indie film, poetry and political prose featuring internationally recognized poets you may have seen on Cinemax, Showtime or HBO’s “Def Poetry Jam.” The event is called Café Nuba and, as the marketing promo states, “It’s Hot and it’s Black.”

Café Nuba is just one of a panoply of projects that have grown from the fertile imagination and energy of Ashara Ekundayo (’94, African American studies and speech communications). Ekundayo is artistic director and founder of the Pan African Arts Society, the umbrella organization for these projects.

Ekundayo started presenting film when she was studying gender and social change at the University of Denver’s Graduate School of International Studies. She produced an international women’s film festival, “Through My Sister’s Eyes,” which snagged appearances by such national luminaries as poet Maya Angelou and independent filmmaker Julie Dash.

Ekundayo went on to produce the first Denver Pan African Film Festival in 2000 and expected members of the community to turn out in droves. They didn’t.

“We realized we were asking people to do something they hadn’t done before,” Ekundayo says. “So-called Black films that come to Denver are very stereotypical. People hadn’t experienced independent film. We started Café Nuba as a marketing tool to promote the festival. We wanted something unique, embracing hip-hop culture -- something activist and fun and uniquely black, that our culture would show up for.”

Inspired by the popularity of poetry slams, Ekundayo and company decided to blend micro-cinema with poetry. They named the event after the Nuba tribe, a disappearing tribe of people in Sudan subject to genocide.

Every last Friday of the month, there’s an “invited poets” set, then a short film followed by an open mic set. The show is taped and shown on Denver Public Access TV and broadcast nationally through a partnership with Boulder’s Free Speech TV. Café Nuba has had its ups and downs, including changes in neighborhood and audience demographics, and this fall celebrates a return to Five Points.

Ekundayo credits Metro for giving her the skills she uses every day in her work.

“Metro really set the tone for who I am,” she says. “The urbanness and openness of it. I feel very blessed to have been mentored by some amazing profs and administrators. I learned how to be an activist, to stand up for myself.”

Ekundayo (then Walker) worked in “probably every office on campus” as she earned her degree and raised her two boys, now in their teens. She also attended the African American

Leadership Training Institute, an erstwhile Metro program that taught empowerment for self and the community.

Today Ekundayo is also co-director of the H<sup>2</sup>O *[note to proofreaders: yes, the "2" is superscript J.L.]* Hip-Hop Odyssey International Film Festival in November in the Bronx, N.Y., which will also appear as part of the sixth Denver Pan African Film Festival at the Starz Film Center in April. And she is co-director of the World Hip-Hop Summit in Paris in November. She sees hip-hop culture as an expression of true pop culture -- not the commercialized, manufactured kind but "the true social aspect of what it means for young people to use their voice for social change."

"I believe artists really do make a difference," Ekundayo adds. "They sometimes forget they have such an influence. I tell them to be accountable, be your brother's or sister's keeper. If you're passionate about it, show me. I feel that that's my job as a cultural worker/curator/arts activist -- to empower artists."

Learn more about Café Nuba and the Pan African Arts Society at [www.panafricanarts.org](http://www.panafricanarts.org).

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