Life

Filmmakers shed light on new Phillis Wheatley Peters documentary

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A new documentary that explores the under-explored domestic life of African poet Phillis Wheatley Peters, commonly referred to as Phillis Wheatley, was screened at the Konover Auditorium, located in the University of Connecticut's Dodd Center, on Wednesday, Sept. 23.

The documentary, "In Search of Phillis Wheatley Peters," focused on Wheatley's marriage with the freed slave John Peters. Documentary director Leslie Askew and collaborator Manisha Sinha, a history professor at UConn, answered questions from the audience and UConn English professor Anna Mae Duane after the screening.

Wheatley was the first African and one of the first women in America to publish her poetry. She published her first poem at only 14 years old, and in 1773, her book "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral" was released. But while her early years are well-documented and discussed, her life after publication has received less coverage.

The documentary still began with Wheatley's earlier life, starting with her kidnapping from West Africa in 1761. It progressed through her learning English through her slaveowners, and the attention she garnered from figures of importance like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin once she got published.

The documentary combined historical paintings and archival prints of Wheatley's poems as some of the main visuals. They appeared alongside modern footage from expert interviews and shots of locations relevant to Wheatley, especially in Boston. There were also depictions of Wheatley and Peters using artificial intelligence, which showed moments like Wheatley writing and the couple getting married.

Wheatley married Peters in 1778, five years after her poetry book's publication. The documentary explained how the couple moved to Middleton, Massachusetts. Parts of their life there, including Peters taking on domestic responsibilities so Wheatley could write more poetry and a legal dispute with the homeowner, Naomi Wilkins, that forced them back to Boston, were recently unearthed by Cornelia Dayton, a UConn history professor.

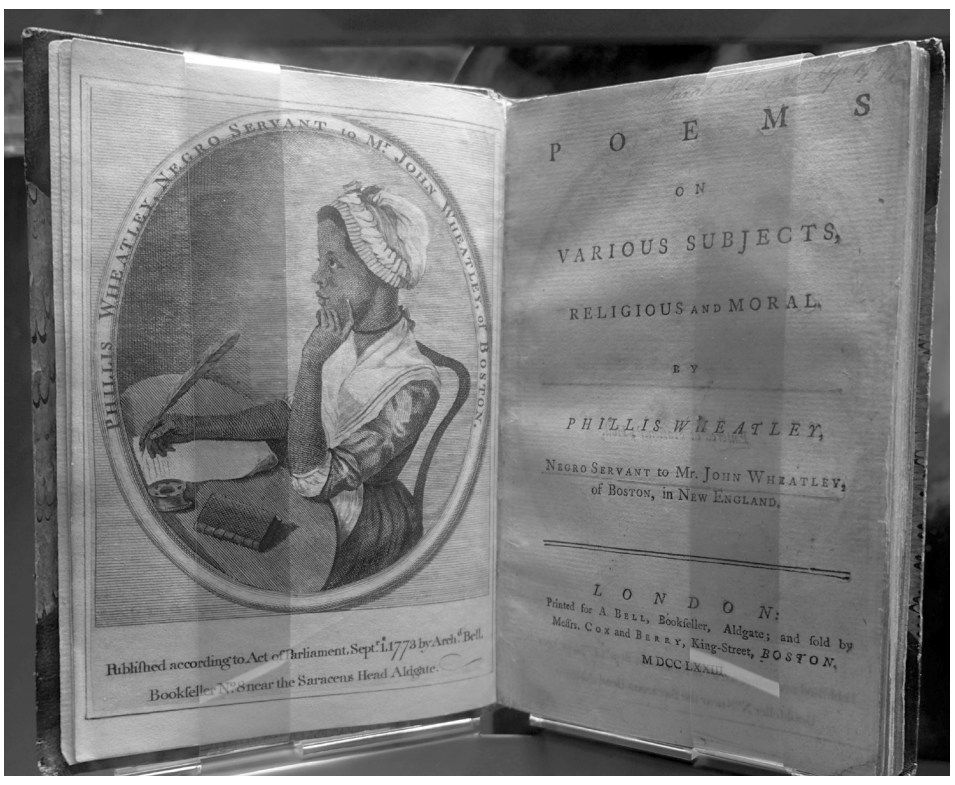
One of the newest revelations came from scraps of a legal dispute, which revealed information about Wheatley's child, whose early death may have inspired one of her last published poems.

After the screening, Duane asked Askew about what inspired her to make the documentary. Askew said she was reintroduced to Wheatley in her adult life by chance and was captivated by her story after doing research.

"She is all black women," Askew said to describe Wheatley's literary prowess and entrepreneurial spirit. But she emphasized that Wheatley's struggles after publication show resilience during darker moments.

Martha Cutter, an English professor at UConn, asked about the use of artificial intelligence in the film, and the creative decision to only use it to display Wheatley and Peters.

Askew said it was important to show humanity, and artificial intelligence helped navigate that. She said it was hard to find relevant and accurate artistic depictions that did not include racial stereotypes that would be harmful. It also helped with the cost that would come from hiring actors.



Book of poetry written by Phillis Wheatley Peters. The documentary about her highlights her life as an African poet.

PHOTOGRAPH BY COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

"I was resistant towards using AI, but it was this or nothing," Askew said.

Victor Dickson, a fifth-semester English student, said the documentary gave him helpful insight into Wheatley's life, and he said it is important to ensure her contributions as an African woman aren't forgotten. He described the use of artificial intelligence in the documentary as "uncanny" but not "awful."

"I think her reasoning and admittance to using AI for this documentary was understandable, and it's not like she's planning to keep this as a standard forever as she even stated that she's hoping to get some funding for actors someday," Dickson said.

Askew said she hopes to turn the current 35-minute documentary into a longer film that can be distributed to different schools.

Unfiltered, Unforgettable: A warm tribute to America's favorite courtroom judge



Judy Sheindlin smiles for a photo. She just recently announced her retirement from the big screen.

PHOTO BY WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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Judge Judith Sheindlin, better known by millions as Judge Judy, has been an iconic household name for more than three decades through her eponymous daytime reality show, which aired on CBS from 1996 to 2021.

Now, "Judge Judy: Unfiltered, Unforgettable," a 90-minute primetime retrospective that aired on CBS on Tuesday, Sep. 22 and now streams on Paramount+, offers a candid snapshot of the five-time-Emmy-winning attorney's life and career. The special, which marks 30 years since Sheindlin debuted her salty and no-nonsense demeanor, features interviews with Sheindlin and some of her closest celebrity friends, including Samuel L. Jackson, Amy Poehler, RuPaul and Steven Spielberg, the latter of whom recalls enlisting Sheindlin for a family mock trial.

It's a family affair, too — the program also highlights Sheindlin's son, two-term New York State district attorney and Judge Adam Levy, as he prepares to launch his own courtroom series, "Adam's Law." We also learn that Sheindlin also has a project of her own in the works, an animated series cunningly titled "Judyverse" that Sheindlin writes, produces and stars in.

In addition to her work on TV, Sheindlin has also garnered a reputation as a prolific author; her first book, facetiously titled "Don't Pee on My Leg and Tell Me It's Raining: America's Toughest Court Judge," chronicles her law career whilst showcasing a brutal, scathing take on the American family court system, juvenile justice and administrative welfare. Her self-help books, "Beauty Fades, Dumb is Forever" and "What Would Judge Say?" offer practical advice on navigating life's ups and downs and embracing your authentic self.

Through home movies, personal archives and narration, Sheindlin recalls her humble beginnings growing up in a Jewish household in Brooklyn, the daughter of a dentist and office manager. After earning her law degree from New York University, she worked in various capacities in New York City as a prosecutor and criminal-court judge, where she first gained the "harsh" reputation that would eventually transform her into a cultural luminary.

It wasn't until 1993, however, that Sheindlin's entertainment career began to take off, when she was profiled in an article in the Los Angeles Times as a woman determined to manage an overloaded court system for the benefit of society. Later that year, a producer from "60 Minutes" read the LA Times piece, which led to her being featured in one of the show's segments. She accepted an offer in 1995 to preside in a new courtroom reality series, and the rest is history.

Although Judge Judy has now retired and plans to step away from the camera, she's made it clear that she's not going anywhere. In an interview with the Spokesman-Review, Sheindlin says she'll stay active by helping produce her son's show and working on her animated series.

"I've enjoyed it for a long time, but you have to know when to say goodbye and when to transition into something else. And I think that time is right for me," Sheindlin said.

Overall, "Unfiltered, Unforgettable" is well worth the watch: with its tongue-in-cheek commentary from Judy herself and warm tributes from those who know and love her the most, the program reveals a raw and honest side of the arbitrator, especially to those who are less familiar with her work.

Rating: 5/5



Judy Sheindlin sits at her court bench. Sheindline headlined her reality show from 1996 to 2021.

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SUBOG Weekly Events:

September 27th - October 4th

Homecoming Parade – 9.27 @ 1:30 PM along Hillside Road
Homecoming Carnival – 9.27 @ 2 PM at Founders Green
Homecoming Pageant – 9.28 @ 6 PM in the Student Union Theater
SUBOG x USG Voter Registration – 10.1 @ 11 AM at the SU Mall
Coffee House – 10.1 @ 4:30 PM at the Benton
Homecoming Lip Sync – 10.1 @ 7 PM in the Jorgensen Theater
Fan Fest Friday – 10.2 @ 1 PM at the SU Mall

Any questions? Email subog@uconn.edu