

# Changing lives from behind the camera

From a life on the edge to one dedicated to helping others, Pee Wee walks the talk

BY SARAH TRANUM

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**M**y word is my bond. If a kid asks me to put him on TV, then I will." Sammie "Pee Wee" West sees a direct connection between the shows he produces on Buffalo's public access cable station and helping kids stay out of trouble.

He eliminates anonymity and replaces it with a sense of community.

"I use a kind of psychology — when people see kids on TV, they recognize them on the streets and then they have to behave," he said.

And aside from creating faces from sometimes faceless neighborhoods, Pee Wee has a knack for unifying areas — like the West and East sides — that haven't always seen eye-to-eye.

"I see good stuff on the East Side and I want to get that talent and put it on my show too," said Pee Wee, who hails from the West Side.

Friend Zellie Dow adds, "everyone knows Pee Wee."

Talent shows, interviews, festivals, parades, roller-skating, drill competitions — Pee Wee is there with a camera ready.

At age 66, he keeps an active schedule. Pee Wee is at the public access studios almost every day — filming, editing and working with kids. He is committed to showing the positive side of Buffalo, its youth and the potential that emanates here.

It's his own personal mission, and cable access is allowing him to do it.

"Even though I'm not making any money, I feel like I'm a millionaire," he said. "It seems like people are always giving me something so that I can do my work."

In a time when public money is tight, when words like inefficiency, corruption, and incompetence are thrown around on a daily basis, Pee Wee is doing what he thinks needs to be done without any direct government grants or contracts.

Through small sponsorships from local businesses and donations from individuals, Pee Wee is able to carry out his vision and create the change he wants to see.

I met Pee Wee on a Tuesday afternoon at the Apollo Media Center during one of his

scheduled studio times. Following the music that streamed into the hallway from one of the studios, I found him in the midst of taping "15 Minutes of Fame & Fortune," a program that showcases young people. Taya Brown, a 7-year-old with a voice that fills a room, was singing Alicia Keys' "If I Ain't Got You."

Pee Wee moved from camera to camera, perfecting angles, and then scooted up to the sound room to adjust the levels and direct production. With the help of Christopher Cooley, an 18-year-old cameraman in training, Pee Wee filmed three segments for two different shows, "15 Minutes of Fame" and "Positive Influences in the Inner City."

"Positive Influences" is hosted by Dow, who explained, "Pee Wee is a hard person to pin down. He's always on the move and always doing something for someone else, usually a kid. Pee Wee will take kids back and forth from school to activities, things that their parents can't always do. He's a do-er."

Pee Wee started on public access TV after a brush with death. Years of hard drinking landed him in the hospital. It was here he made a promise that if he made it out alive, he would help keep kids from drinking and doing drugs.

It's a promise he has kept. After seeing a flier for the public access cable station, Pee Wee discovered television production — and the rest was history.

Nineteen years later he is still sober and doing what he can to save others from taking the same dangerous path he did.

"Pee Wee helps so many kids and young adults — he tries to keep us off the streets, he helps us to find jobs," said Rhonda Bryant, a family friend and someone who has benefited from Pee Wee's positive influence. "He lectures us on life and what is right."

With so much news about what is wrong with this city, it's important to remember people like Pee Wee West who, away from the fray of red budgets and control boards, are living and working for something better for themselves and those around them.

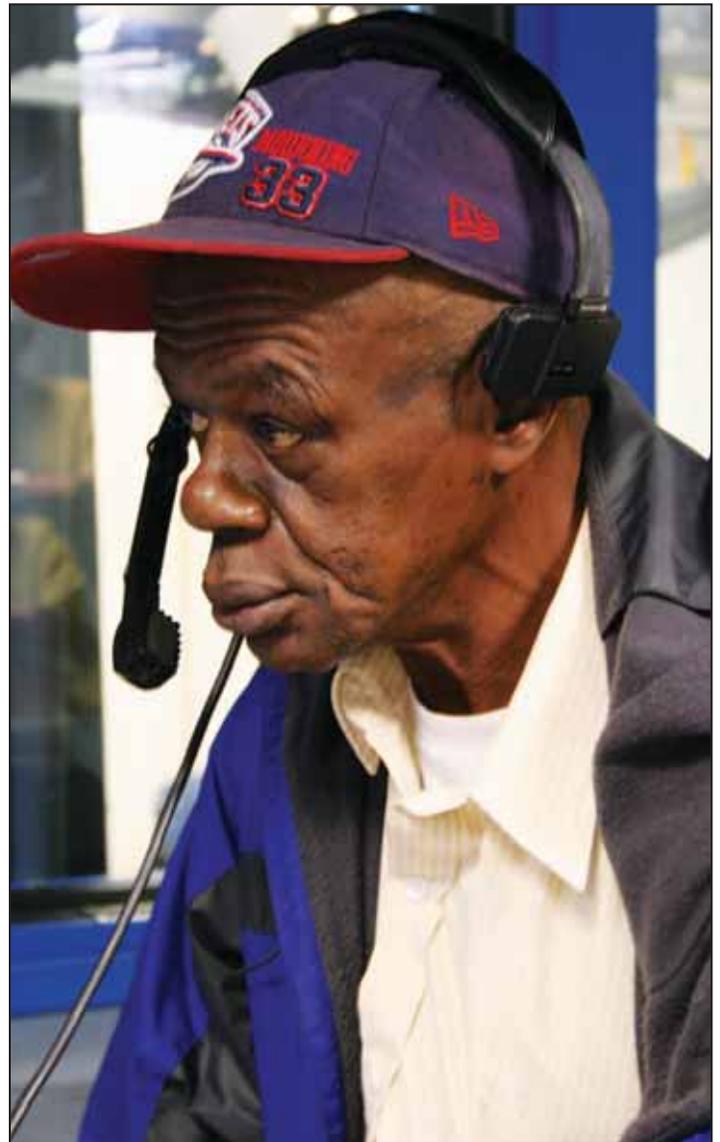
These are the people who are Buffalo.

## A part of West Side history

Sammie "Pee Wee" West was photographed by Buffalo documentary photographer Milton Rogovin over a 30-year span. He is part of the book, "Triptychs, Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited."

Pee Wee credits Rogovin for his successes. "I am thankful to Milton Rogovin for everything I've accomplished. He's my role model. I saw him using his camera and it inspired me to get behind a camera, too."

In 2003, Pee Wee and Milton Rogovin traveled to Washington, D.C., where they were both honored for their accomplishments, Rogovin for his social documentary photography and Pee Wee for his work with youth.



PHOTOS BY SARAH TRANUM

ABOVE: Sammie "Pee Wee" West watches over the production of one of his six programs on cable access Channel 20. OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP RIGHT: "The Baby Females," a dance troupe consisting of Mikal Pettigrew, 9, Nila Lewis, 11, and Alexis Rehanek, 10, review their routine on screen after performing for the cameras. MIDDLE RIGHT: Taya Brown, 7, is interviewed by host Zellie Dow, as part of the "Positive Influences in the Inner City" program. BOTTOM RIGHT: Pee Wee sets up the camera for the next take. FAR RIGHT: Pee Wee poses with Taya Brown and her mother, Kimberly Brown, after Taya's performance on "15 Minutes of Fame and Fortune."



### Tune In

Pee Wee produces six different television programs for the City of Buffalo public access Channel 20.

Check out his shows at the following times:

Monday: 8:30 p.m., Jazz, Gospel, Blues

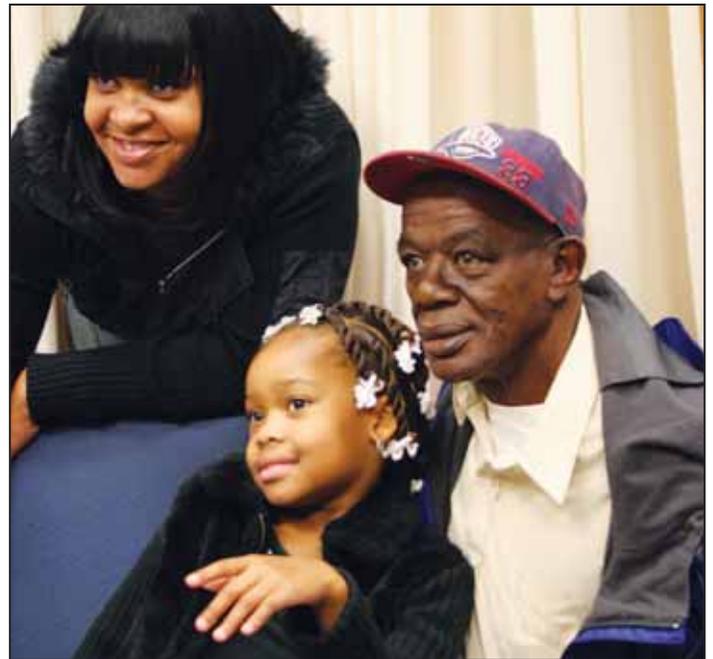
Monday: 10:00 p.m., Reverend Brewer

Tuesday: 8:30 p.m., Janette Lane

Wednesday: 6:30 p.m., Positive Influences in the Inner City

Thursday: 3:30 p.m., Pee Wee TV

Friday: 9:00 p.m., 15 Minutes of Fame & Fortune



### Get Informed

THE CABLE COMMUNICATIONS ACT OF 1984 made it possible for local jurisdictions, like the City of Buffalo, to make decisions regarding cable franchise agreements. This opened the way for public access stations like Channel 20. From the City of Buffalo website:

"It is the mission of the Buffalo Municipal Telecommunications Center to bring to all citizens the ability to communicate their message, to be assisted in the creation and distribution of that message..."

But this mandate could be threatened. Currently, Congress is reviewing legislation which could take away the main source revenue for public access stations around the country.

Senate Bill 1504 — the Broadband Investment and Consumer Choice Act was introduced in July by Republican Senators John Ensign of Nevada and John McCain of Arizona. Although supporters of the bill claim it will open the door for more competition in the cable industry, it could bring an end to the public programming currently being broadcast.

From Democracy Now, "The legislation would eliminate a requirement for telecommunications companies to pay franchise fees to local municipalities. These fees are required as compensation to the community for use of the public right of way through which the companies route cables and utilities. By eliminating the franchise fees, the bill will eliminate the only source of funding that the public access provider receives."

To help ensure that public access cable has a viable future and programs like Pee Wee's can continue, call your local U.S. Congressperson.

To learn how you can start your own program on the City of Buffalo cable access Channel 20, call the Apollo Media Center at (716) 881-9300.