“Battle: Change From Within” explores an educator’s role in desegregating the Columbia, Missouri schools.

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“Battle: Change from Within,” is a documentary about educator Eliot Battle and the pivotal role he played in desegregating schools, housing, and the Columbia, Missouri community. As Battle facilitated changes with quiet resolve, he faced resistance from both the black and white communities. His calm demeanor and dedicated work within existing institutions and systems allowed him to bridge the gap between the two races and change Columbia for the better.

“The film is really an insider’s look at desegregation as it happened in Columbia and the personal toll it took on Battle and his family to bridge the gap between Columbia’s black and white communities,” said Michael Hicks, University of Missouri Extension film and TV producer who co-directed and edited the film.

Battle, who had been an assistant principal at Columbia’s all-black Douglass High School, became a guidance counselor and the first black faculty member at Hickman High School in 1960, serving as an advocate, mentor and mediator during the crucial early years of Hickman’s transformation into an integrated school.

The 55-minute documentary tells his story through archival film footage, newspaper accounts, still photos, and interviews with former students, colleagues, community leaders, Battle’s children and Battle himself.
“Many films about desegregation focus on conflict,” Hicks said. “What is unique about Eliot’s story and our film is his personality, his thinking and his philosophy of life that allowed him to defuse volatile situations and help everyone peacefully achieve better outcomes.”

As the 87-year-old Battle puts it, “Fighting from within is the right way to go. The only way you are going to make change is to be a change agent and be in there working with the powers that be.”

“We are so excited that we are able to share such a powerful and inspiring story,” said Julie Middleton, MU Extension director of organizational development and one of the film’s co-directors.

The project was funded with 90 individual donations.

“We would not have been able to make this film without all the donations from the community and I am very grateful for the support,” Hicks said. “This is a great example of how MU Extension works hard to find alternative ways to fund projects.”

Middleton and Hicks collaborated on the film with Juanamaria Cordones Cook, MU professor of Spanish, and Barbara Williamson, associate teaching professor in the MU College of Education.

After creating public awareness of the film, MU Extension hopes to integrate parts of the documentary into its 4-H curriculum and leadership training programs. Extension also plans to make “Battle: Change From Within” available to schools as a downloadable video file with an accompanying teaching guide.