

POWERLESS: SMALLTOWN HERO

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Figure 1: Screen grab from the film *Powerless: Small Town Hero*

I am a filmmaker, journalist, and comic book writer. My film *Powerless: Small Town Hero* was inspired by the Black superhero Luke Cage. I grew up reading the series, but as I got older, I realized that something about Luke Cage troubled me: Cage was a paid "hero for hire." All the other, notably white superheroes selflessly helped others because it was "the right thing to do." They never accepted monetary gain because they did not want or need payment for their services. When I had an argument about this with a family member, their response was that no Black man would willingly help others for free. I strongly disagreed with that statement and created the comic book character Powerhouse, and the film *Powerless Small Town Hero* to combat that stereotype. *In a world where Blackness is perceived as a threat, was it possible for a Black man to be a superhero?* My film and the character I created seeks to answer this question.

Filming *Powerless Small Town Hero* was an adventure as a Black man living in Iowa City, Iowa. Blackness alone is seen as a threat in America, so for many Black Americans, just walking home is terrifying as it could become a life or death situation at any moment for any reason. As I both starred, directed, and filmed *Powerless* in Iowa City, I found these thoughts creeping in my mind during the whole process. I was both making commentary on the inherent racist biases

everyone has, while equally fearing them more strongly than ever before. There were times I was out late at night filming scenes by myself and wondering how others would react to seeing a Black man "loitering on the side of the road" wearing a white superhero mask and black hoodie jacket. Would they call the cops? If the cops showed up while I was testing my audio with the soundproof headphones, was there a chance I would end up like the character Powerhouse? These are the questions that many Black Americans are placed in a position to ask ourselves, sometimes daily.

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