
Entertainment & Life

CJ Extra: WIFI Film Festival draws filmmakers to Topeka

By Carolyn Kaberline, Special to The Capital-Journal

Posted Apr 9, 2019 at 8:25 PM

When the idea of having a film festival in Topeka was first mentioned, it was greeted with enthusiasm and excitement.

However, as it came time to call for submissions, many worried that finding enough films to fill several hours, let alone days, would be a problem. They needn't have worried: Almost 2,000 films from around the world soon led to a different problem — which films would they have time to show?

The festival will take place Thursday, April 11, through Saturday, April 13, at Washburn University's White Concert Hall and Rita Blitt Gallery. The festival is free, and tickets can be acquired online.

Washburn University's Mass Media Department chairwoman, Maria Stover, and Matthew Nyquist, filmmaker and assistant professor of film and video, answered questions about the brand-new Washburn International Film Institute (WIFI) Film Festival event.

How did the WIFI festival come about, and what is its purpose?

Stover: This is our inaugural year. Matt came to me with the idea of a film festival in August of 2018. I loved it and we started working on it right away. The first thing we had to figure out was the location for the festival. The chair of the music department, Craig Treinen, helped us reserve White Concert Hall, and Connie Gibbons, director of the Mulvane Art Museum, embraced the idea of a film festival right away. She has been one of our biggest champions, and we are very thankful for that.

We hope the film festival will put Washburn University and Topeka on the

map by bringing filmmakers from Kansas and across the nation for a three-day event dedicated to fostering cultural diversity and understanding through visual expression. At the core of WIFI's inception is the belief that cinema is one of the most democratic arts with its ability to reach large audiences on an accessible and inclusive level. Documentaries, in particular, can shine light on important topics as well as encourage audiences to think about, and in some instances, even take action, on important issues.

WIFI holds the guiding principle that students at Washburn, Topeka community members, and Kansans should have a place to showcase and promote their work and come together to celebrate stories from the Midwest in film and artistic expression. With that in mind, the WIFI Film Festival involves Washburn students, faculty, staff, community members, high school students and local organizations as filmmakers, event sponsors, judges, event planners and organizers, volunteers and audiences.

We have been receiving so much support and positive feedback that I believe we can grow the festival into an annual community event. If everything goes as planned, we have a lot of ideas on how to scale next year's festival.

There is one thing we know we do not want change though — we want to keep the festival free to audiences. It might mean that we have to seek corporate sponsors for next year (I hope they will read this), but we want to keep the festival free. We want to provide Kansans the opportunity to see exciting, thought-provoking film content in a beautiful setting for free.

Nyquist: Allan Holzman, who is our keynote speaker this year, and I frequently collaborate on projects. Most recently, I worked with him on "Dare to be Different," which premiered at Tribeca and was bought by Showtime. It is still on their on-demand service. When discussing various projects and things, Allan pitched the idea of starting a film festival and that he would support it as he is by coming. I loved the idea but was just overwhelmed with work and projects at the time. Late summer 2018, Allan was telling me about his new project I could help with ... now titled "Imagine," and pitched the idea of that movie premiering at the festival. I loved the idea and while nervous about the amount of work involved and the prospect of attracting films to Topeka, Kansas, I decided to go forward with it.

I immediately met with Dr. Maria Stover, who is by far the best boss I have ever had. Most try to figure out ways to tell you no, but when you bring an idea to her she tries her absolute best to help you make it a reality. She instantly jumped on board and asked how she could help and has been absolutely instrumental in this becoming a reality. Without Dr. Stover, I think it is safe to say the festival would not be happening. The amount of support she has given me (and she does it to all of us) is astounding to me, and the main reason I am so happy at Washburn. Since then it has been a whirlwind of making the thing become a real event.

The main goal: When I arrived at Washburn, the other emphases in our department did a fantastic job of professional exposure and getting students career ready. I felt that the film area could drastically improve on this and have tried to figure out ways to achieve this. The film festival does this very well. It brings in outside talent and professional eyeballs and gives the students a chance to showcase their work in a high quality environment to the world and working professionals. In bringing in people like Allan Holzman, I also hope to draw attention to Washburn and our department in general. I was shocked when I arrived as I had never heard of Washburn beyond the law school while growing up in Lindsborg, Kansas. The opportunity that the school provides is absolutely outstanding. Our department works together across the emphases (advertising, PR, journalism and film/video) to accomplish goals and give our students a wide variety of professional opportunities and skills. For the film festival, all the emphases are using their skills to make it a reality so that it benefits all of us and not just the film students. Hopefully it will attract positive attention to the university, our department and Topeka. It is a great place that doesn't get enough credit!

When did you start taking entries? How many entries do you currently have for this event? Are the entries just from Washburn students or from the community at large?

Nyquist: We started taking entries on Nov. 6, 2018. The first entry was "Seeing Scarlet," which is a fantastic film made by all Washburn film students. (It's) written by Ethan Jackson and Avery Stratton and directed by Ethan Jackson; producers (are) Blake Hopper and Madeleine Switzer. On Jan. 3, the entries starting picking up because our website went live and that checked the last box Film Freeway, the service we used to acquire entries, requires to publicly list and

promote your festival. The flood gates came open. I was initially worried we wouldn't have enough entries to fill even a few hours of the festival let alone the whole thing, but we ended up with 1,978 total entries from more than a hundred countries world-wide.

Entries started locally, but opened up worldwide once we qualified to be listed publicly on Film Freeway.

Tell me about a few of the entries.

Nyquist: The fact that we got an Academy Award-winning short literally blew my mind. When I first watched it I thought that it was amazingly good, so I looked it up on IMDb. I saw that it had been nominated for an Academy Award, so I was sure it was the wrong movie. After I compared the crew, etc., I discovered that it was actually that film! When I watched the Oscars and it got to "Best Live Action Short," I was thrilled to just see the clip on TV, but when it won, I literally jumped around the house I (was) so excited. "Skin" is a fabulous movie that is incredibly timely and appropriate for the zeitgeist. I'm excited for people to see it.

In addition, I am incredibly excited to show people "Seeing Scarlet." One of my initiatives at Washburn has been to redesign the film curriculum to be more professional and career focused. I was incredibly lucky to go to USC Film School, which is consistently rated No. 1 in the world and only takes 6 percent of applicants. As much as I can, I model the curriculum after that model with changes to ensure students have the best possible chance to have a career doing what they want in the field. The most advanced film class is Filmmaking 2, where the students that want to direct and produce get into duos and pitch the film. The class votes on which project to do and then the entire semester we operate as a production company and studio creating that one film. The winning duo interviews the rest of the class and hires out the other positions as they would on a professional set. The students, after having learned all the roles in other classes, fulfill just that one role throughout the semester. The first time I taught this class was a year ago (spring 2018) and the project was "Seeing Scarlet." The students completely exceeded my expectations, and I'm excited to see just what these students can do. The film has already made it into a few other festivals, including one where they only took the top three from each category. I

cannot wait to let people see what Washburn students can do.

Stover: The first Washburn International Film Institute (WIFI) Film Festival will be the premiere for a documentary about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy by Allan Holzman (“Survivors of the Holocaust,” “Old Man River”), who is a Peabody and two-time Emmy Award-winning filmmaker. Additionally, the festival will premiere a selected film from Holzman’s “The Art of Directing” series over Hollywood director David Lean (“Lawrence of Arabia,” “Doctor Zhivago”). The film includes previously unseen footage from the American Film Institute of Lean conducting master classes on filmmaking and interacting with students while teaching.

This is our first year, but we have a person from Hollywood, Allan Holzman, who chose Washburn as the site for the world premiere of his DACA documentary. In fact, Washburn made it possible for him to come to Topeka and spend three days visiting classes and interacting with our students. Allan will be interviewed by KTWU’s Eugene Williams that Friday, right after the premiere of his documentary.

We also have another filmmaker, University of Arizona professor Beverly Seckinger, visit Washburn on Friday for the showing of her documentary “Laramie Inside Out.” I think the experience of watching a documentary is greatly augmented when audiences have the opportunity to meet the filmmaker in person.

How will the entries be judged? What kind of awards will be given out?

Stover: Matt and Sam Finch have been involved with this part the most. I have done most of the outreach and fundraising, but I need to point out that all mass media faculty have been involved with the festival. Our PR faculty, Kristen Grimmer, has been instrumental in the promotional aspects of the festival and is managing the 40 volunteers we will have. Our second film professor, Sam Finch, is in charge of the festival program. Our journalism faculty and students are designing the festival program. Our advertising professor will supervise the social media campaign.

The mass media program places strong emphasis on applied skills so the festival has been a great opportunity for our students to practice event planning and

promotion, as well as design and writing. In fact, the logo, T-shirts, all promotional materials, even the award certificates are designed by mass media students. We will also ask our students to take a lead role in presenting the winning entries at the awards ceremony on April 13.

Nyquist: Since we got so many more entries than we expected, we put together a group of our top students to give initial thumbs up or thumbs down to projects to weed out any that weren't going to make the cut. The movies that made it beyond that were then judged by a group of hand-picked Washburn professors and community leaders, as well as myself and Sam Finch (our new film faculty that I am overjoyed to have).

(Washburn) President Jerry Farley will be choosing and picking the President's Award Winner, and our guest Allan Holzman will give an award named after him. Others include the Golden Bowtie — Best film overall (All Categories); Golden Ichabod — Best film by a Washburn student or alum; Audience Award Narrative — Overall vote from the audience for best overall narrative film; Audience Award Documentary — Overall vote for the best documentary; Best directing — Narrative; Best directing — Documentary; Best Film by a Kansas High School Student; and Best Film by a Kansas Middle School Student.