

Published September 29th, 2010

Race To Nowhere Hits the Big Screen

By Andrea A. Firth



Producer and Director Vicki Abeles Photo by Ohlen Alexander

"This is about the health of our children," says Lafayette resident Vicki Abeles, the producer and co-director of the documentary film *Race to Nowhere*, which will be screened at hundreds of theaters and schools nationwide over the next month. Stress-related illnesses, sleep deprivation, and depression are among the negative health consequences students in the film describe experiencing as a result of the unyielding demands of school and the pressure to compete and perform in today's achievement-obsessed society. "Our kids need some balance in their lives," says Abeles, who began working on the film back in 2007 motivated by her struggle to manage the hectic schedules and academic expectations that faced her three children.

Abeles, formerly a corporate attorney on Wall Street and at Goldman Sachs, repurposed her skills to the movie industry, because she believed film was the best way to start a national dialogue about a school system that she found was plagued with cheating, disengagement, and the inability to adequately prepare young people for college and the workplace. "We need a paradigm shift," says Abeles.

While she acknowledges that change is going to take time, Abeles has seen examples of parents, teachers, and school administrators coming together after seeing the film and working toward alternative approaches. "The film is inspiring change wherever we go," says Abeles. "It's difficult for parents and schools to effect change individually," says the filmmaker adding, "It is easier for a community to make change when they come together."

The film's message is resonating with audiences and a grass roots effort has begun to spread the word. The release of *Race to Nowhere* at prominent theaters in New York and Los Angeles in

September was met with good reviews and strong audience attendance, says Abeles. Several hundred more screenings are scheduled throughout the fall, and several thousand requests to screen the film are pending.

"The reason we are able to get the film out into the community is due to the support of motivated parents and educators," says Abeles, explaining that schools and local organizations identify venues and co-sponsor the screenings. Reel Link Films, Abeles' production company, donates half of the ticket sale proceeds back to these groups to offset expenses. A facilitation guide to complement the film has also been developed as a resource for schools.

"It's all been good-an incredible experience," says Abeles, reflecting upon the 3 1/2 year journey from her start as a neophyte filmmaker, one that she says has helped her to grow both professionally and personally. As she manages the documentary's launch and distribution, Abeles also facilitates the parents group on Edutopia, part of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, and she has started to work on other education-related film projects. She believes the experience has been positive for her children as well. "It's been valuable for them to see me take risks and to hear about my failures during the project along with the successes," says Abeles. "I'm a different person and parent due to this work."

Race to Nowhere will be shown at Las Lomas High School in Walnut Creek on Thursday, September 30th and at The New Rheim Theatre on Monday, October 4th at 7 p.m. For more information and other screening locations go to www.racetonowhere.com.

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