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Short Docs festival touches hearts and minds

By Sophie Braccini



Middle school filmmakers Zachary Lara and Keith Johnson stand with Matt Chaney, their Short Doc subject, along with their moms. Photo Christy Mack

The second edition of the Lamorinda Short Docs festival and competition was a vibrant testimony of the budding local visual talents the region holds.

In a time when images and videos are favorite media, this celebration is welcomed. With participants from kindergarten to adults, and documentaries from the most simple to the most polished, the festival showcased amusing, beautiful, meaningful, surprising and informative short films made and produced by students and amateur adults. It could have attracted a wider audience.

Lamorinda Arts Council started the video competition last year with LAC Meredith Frieman as the main driver. This year 16 short docs were in competition in four categories: elementary school, middle school, high school and adults. It was judged by cable network producer Greg Flucher, T.V. producer Joel Patterson, writer, filmmaker and actor Julie Rubio and editor, animator and colorist David Santamaria.

In attendance at the Lafayette library on May 7 were mostly the parents and friends of the filmmakers, but the presentation would have deserved a wider audience, as the spectators were charmed by these unique creations.

The elementary school group took the audience by surprise with the freshness and humor of films such as "Are Dolls Creepy?" by first grader Luna Rose Randolph. The movie that came in second as the audience favorite was completely out of the box, with unexpected interviews, shots of adults from a child's height, fun shots of the most unlikely dolls, and rustic but fun visual and sound effects. It seemed like the authentic voice of a 6-year-old full of mischievousness and wit.

The winner in the elementary school category was also a gem, "Anika's Quincinera," by fourth-grader Lukacs Gero. The 15th birthday party and interviews were filmed with sensitivity, a good sense of framing and a sense of storytelling.

The middle school category was a very big step up from the elementary school group. The filmmakers created a story that has a beginning, a middle and end, showing that they are starting to really understand how videos can be used to send a message.

In that category, the winner was sixth grader Jack Nixon who presented "The Culture of Skateboarding Revealed," where he demonstrated that skaters are not kids looking for trouble or part of a counterculture, but creative youth of all ages, colors, socioeconomic backgrounds, getting together to thrive and test their limits. The movie included some drone footage of the Moraga Skate Park, slow motion, and skating visuals nicely weaved with interviews.

The audience favorite was also part of that category. Movies are judged by a group of professionals in each category, and LAC also allows the audience to choose one school-age favorite after all the films have been viewed. Zachary Lara and Keith Johnson won this prize for their movie "Matt: A Story of Hope and Inspiration," about Matt Chaney, who is suffering from the highly debilitating condition ALS. The film is a touching portrait, never too dramatic and even humorous at times.

"Behind The Scenes of Campolindo's 'Beauty and The Beast'" by Frenel Franciso won the high school category, an excellent film that was able to convey the atmosphere of camaraderie and all the hard work that needs to happen to put together a sophisticated high school musical.

The adult category entries were all bordering on professional level videography. "Sunjams" was an all-music film presenting the local nonprofit that raises money to fund musical education in less fortunate schools; "Pack 464" told the unique story of the Pinewood Derby, a cub scout activity and competition where boys build small wood cars and race them; "Getting It Right" presented, in a very aesthetic and interesting portrayal of Steve Benjamins, who restores and tunes pianos in Lafayette; and the winner was Roka Pigniczky's "Wild Thing," the sculpture that was created by elementary school children in Orinda and is now on display at the library plaza.

Local filmmaker and judge Rubio expressed her enthusiasm at the quality of the videos that were presented

and rejoiced that LAC created this competition to nurture and recognize these abilities in young filmmakers. LAC plans to hold the competition again next year.

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