

Best little film festival

By David Scribner

GREAT BARRINGTON - Although she wouldn't quite put it this way, Kelley Vickery believes she has the makings for the best little film festival in the nation.

Four years ago Vickery founded the Berkshire International Film Festival in Great Barrington, a four-day feast of independent films for filmmakers and film aficionados, with showings of features and documentaries, shorts and animation, scheduled in mid-May as a kick-off to the Berkshires cultural season.

This year, the festival opens Thursday, May 14. with a block party on Railroad Street and the screening of "William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe," a documentary about the radical civil rights lawyer, and ends Sunday with the showing of two stunning documentary films created by two Berkshire-based filmmakers, "Axis of Good" by Rick Derby and "Poet of Poverty" by Freke Vuijst.

In only its fourth season, the festival attracted 500 submissions, of which 77 were selected for screening. To accommodate the growing diversity of its schedule, BIFF has expanded its venues, now offering free screenings of films for children at the Mason Library, in addition to screenings at the Triplex Cinema and the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center.

"In five years," she predicts, "it will be twice the size in terms of the audience."

Her goal is to create a festival that, like the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado, becomes nationally known for celebrating the art of film making.

"Telluride is all about the filmmakers, about the stories they've created, and they only show world premiere films. That's what we want. And they are also, like us, a three and a half day festival," she explained. "BIFF offers regional premieres, and a few world premiere shorts. We're growing in reputation, and we've survived for four years when so many film festivals don't make it past the third year."

While BIFF draws on films that have been celebrated across the world "The Yes Men Fix the World," for instance, won the Audience Award at the Berlin Film Festival it also showcases remarkable work by remarkable Berkshire filmmakers.

Freke Vuijst, for 30 years a resident of Great Barrington, creates documentaries for Dutch TV. Five years ago, she and her partners in Green Room Productions decided to create a film about poverty in America by focusing on the eloquent descriptions of impoverished Camden, New Jersey, written by a parish priest, Father Doyle.

"Poverty in America is a difficult subject to make a film about," Vuijst notes. "Its causes are complex and solutions extremely difficult. It is a subject hidden behind headlines. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the country was shocked that the poor had been left to drown. All over this great country there are pockets of extreme poverty, and then there are entire cities, like Camden, that have fallen off the train of progress, as Father Doyle says. His words reveal once more what life is like in a poor city, month after month, year after year."

The film was made over four years, shot mostly in Camden. Vuijst relates how Father Doyle wrote down the observations of a young Camden boy who said that he was not afraid of terrorists doing to Camden what they did to the World Trade Center because “if the terrorists flew over Camden, they knew that they had done it already.”

“Axis of Good: A Story from 9/11” by Hinsdale native Rick Derby is also about the acts of terrorism and their aftermath. The title turns on its head the rubric, “Axis of Evil,” assigned to certain rogue countries by former President George W. Bush as a way of justifying war against them. A work in progress, the documentary explores the transformation of grief to forgiveness, as a Bennington, Vermont, couple, Sally and Don Goodrich, struggle to come to terms with the death of their son, Peter, a passenger aboard United Airlines Flight 175 that was the second plane to smash into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

“We started filming in 2004,” Derby, a graduate of Wahconah Regional High School, said from his studio in New York City. “It’s an episodic documentary episodic because a new story keeps erupting out of the last story, and it’s about trying to understand what this journey is about and where it will end.”

After an extended period of painful mourning, Sally Goodrich became convinced that the way to commemorate her son’s life would be to do what he would have done: She decided to establish the Peter M. Goodrich Memorial Trust Fund, to help raise money to build a school for girls in Loghar Province, Afghanistan, about an hour outside of Kabul.

The Title 1 coordinator for the North Adams School District, Sally Goodrich had learned from her son’s best friend, Marine Maj. Rush Filson of Williamstown who was stationed in Afghanistan, that the war-ravaged country needed school supplies. Eventually, she was able to raise \$250,000 for the construction of a school.

For that effort, she will receive an honorary degree from the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts at commencement ceremonies the day before the film festival screening.

But the story does not end with the Goodrich’s numerous trips to Afghanistan and their efforts to restore the values of learning in a culture devastated not only by war but also by violent clashes of ideology.

In the village where the girls’ school was being built, Sally and Don Goodrich had befriended two village elders whose 14 daughters were being educated in the school Sally funded. Although in nearby towns the Taliban, believing education of women to be in violation of their interpretation of the Koran, had been burning down schools, in this village, the Goodrich’s felt safe and protected.

Last month, however, they were notified that the village patriarchs with whom they had developed a trusting friendship, had been arrested as Taliban collaborators by American troops. A raid on their houses had uncovered weapons and bombs.

The Goodrich’s flew to Kabul and were presented with the evidence of the elders’ treachery.

“If the military is right about these men, we are in a very bad place in Afghanistan,” she said in an interview. “These are people who have interacted with Americans in a very positive way, and if now they are trying to kill Americans, the we truly don’t understand where the place is.”

“It’s too dangerous to film in Afghanistan now,” Derby said. “But my wife is from Haiti, where there is a lot of violence and where the rule of an eye for an eye prevails. We have the luxury of democracy and freedom, but that’s not how a lot of the world really is.”

The collision of cultures the interface of the Goodrich’s with village life in Afghanistan, where loyalties are governed by the threat of force is what fascinates Derby.

“You to have to look at this story as one about the miracle of life,” he said. “It’s about the human spirit. There is nothing in Sally and Don’s life I’d want for myself I’m a parent, too. But I need to know how they did it, how they can endure the sorrow of their son’s death and turn it into good. There’s such intense sorrow underneath this story.”

On the other hand, he said, it is important to appreciate what the Afghans are going through, “how difficult it is and how much more we need to know about people who live with strife and perpetual war. We can’t impose our ideas on them.”

Derby said he’s taking the “non-Hollywood,” long-term approach to finishing this film.

“I’ve got about 400 hours filmed, and I’ve gone too far to give up control of this story to a commercial venture,” he said. “Perhaps it will end up as a 3-part series, but I really appreciate BIFF and their confidence in this film. The festival has never shown a work-in-progress before.”

In addition to these two documentary features, BIFF will also screen four other works by Berkshire filmmakers: Mati Kiin’s “Impulse to Soar,” about the Berkshire Children’s Chorus from Sheffield; and shorts “Animal Tricks” by Sanjiban Sellew, “Cowboy Yoga” by Hal Clifford, “Bach of the Antarctic” by Ben Hillman and “Pretty Dead Flowers,” directed by Justin Liberman.