

Student filmmakers focus on environmental C.A.U.S.E.

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By Barbara Vancheri, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



"Priceless," a film made by Art Institute of Pittsburgh students, won the audience choice award at the National Undergraduate Film Festival of Columbia University. The cast includes Courtney Menzler, left, and Nic Vincent.

The same pressing environmental topics that dominate front pages and newscasts caught the attention -- and cameras -- of 37 teams of student filmmakers.

They used humor, voiceover narration, one-on-one interviews and new or archival stills and footage to make their points about gas drilling, littering, recycling, pollution and tainted or precious water in the C.A.U.S.E. (Creating Awareness and Understanding of Our Surrounding Environment) Challenge high school film festival.

At a ceremony Thursday night, Pittsburgh CAPA senior Juliana Stricklen walked away with the grand prize for her short film, "Drilling Marcellus: Gas Drilling in Pittsburgh."

She won a \$1,000 cash prize, digital video camera and case, Pittsburgh Filmmakers class voucher, director's chair, Carnegie Science Center passes and Three Rivers Film Festival tickets. CAPA will be given \$1,500 to support its science and media programs and a trophy.

A baker's dozen of schools and 37 teams of filmmakers entered the sixth annual competition with short films about such diverse topics as carbon emissions, the secret life of trees and, from Mercer Area High School, "The Adventures of Enviro-Dude."

In addition to Ms. Stricklen, other winners were:

Abstract/Experimental: "Lids Off" by Amy Foster, Ashanti D. Lee and Levi McCandless, juniors at Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School.

Narrative: "Scenes From Later" by David Korotky, a Moon Area High School senior.

Documentary: "Green Burial in Pittsburgh" by Samantha Shipeck, a junior at Pine-Richland High School.

Communicating Science: "What's in Your Water?" by Randall Mialecki and John Grondwalski, juniors at St. Joseph High School.

They each receive \$300 in cash, directors' chairs, science center passes and film festival tickets. Each prize-winning school also gets \$1,500 and a trophy.

The event is sponsored by Bayer Corp., Carnegie Science Center's SciTech Initiative and Pittsburgh Filmmakers.

Elisabeth Guilbaud-Cox, deputy director for UNEP's Regional Office for North America in Washington, D.C., joined the students at the ceremony.

The United Nations Environment Programme was established by the General Assembly in 1972 to act as the leading environmental authority within the U.N. system. It provides worldwide environmental leadership by inspiring nations to improve quality of life without compromising future generations.

Audience crowd-pleaser

"Priceless," a 19-minute film made by a half-dozen students at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, captured the audience's attention and favor at a recent film festival. It received the Concord Award, given to the audience choice of best film at the National Undergraduate Film Festival of Columbia University.

"Priceless," the biting story of two married couples filmed in Pittsburgh last year, was made by students Jonathan Ong, Phil Atkins, Elliott Acevedo, Stephen Raney, Chad Calcagno and JC Conklin. They received a glass trophy and \$100 cash prize.

Faculty member Christian Lockerman supervised the workshop that shaped "Priceless" from inception to completion during summer and fall 2009 semesters.

"Jonathan is the one who submitted it and did a lot of the legwork. He was the representative of the group and spoke during a question and answer period," Mr. Lockerman said. "All six were involved in every step of the process," though.

"Priceless" owed some of its scenes, especially one in the Fort Pitt Tunnel, to guerrilla filmmaking, although students shot at Mr. Lockerman's Lawrenceville loft, an Art Institute gallery and Piccolo Forno when it was closed to the public.

Nic Vincent, who plays one of the leads, also painted a key piece of artwork that factors into the story. The tidy cast also includes Courtney Menzler, Donna Brungo and Rick Bullock.

Mr. Ong, one of the students who attended the festival, said it was "pretty awesome" to watch the movie with festival goers. "A lot of the movies had a kind of humorous end to them and got a lot of audience reaction," such as snickering and laughing.

"Ours was the heaviest drama," which produced some gasps and involuntary cries of "Oh no" by the unexpected end.

The film, which has been submitted for other student and regular festivals, taught the students many lessons, including the importance of preparation and assembling shot lists and prop checkpoints in addition to writing the script.

"The more you plan ahead, the fewer problems you will have on the set," Mr. Calcagno said. It's impossible to avoid problems entirely, so learning how to problem-solve is invaluable, too.

And then your biggest problem might be how to deliver a winning acceptance speech.

Mountain madness

"North Face," an adventure tale based on a true story about a competition to climb the most dangerous rock face in the Alps in 1936, will open at the Harris Theater on Saturday instead of today due to a gallery crawl.

The Harris, Downtown, tonight will show free shorts by local filmmakers starting at 5:30 p.m. for crawl participants.

Contact movie editor Barbara Vancheri at bvancheri@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1632. Read her Mad About the Movies blog at post-gazette.com/movies.

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