

Catherine Pfitzer vows to hold fast to the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival's vision of providing independent films to a growing Birmingham audience.

FOUNDED IN 1999, the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival entertained 3,000 enthusiastic film lovers its inaugural year. Each year thereafter, the event has continued to grow and attract filmmakers, fans and industry insiders. Last year, 12,000 audience members watched independent films, joined salon discussions and networked in a variety of venues throughout the city streets. In January of this year, after serving as program manager since 2003, Catherine Pfitzer became the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival's second executive director. Under her leadership, the organization will remain true to the festival's original vision of bringing new films to new audiences. This year, the ninth annual film festival hopes to attract even more independent film buffs, showcase new talent and provide a forum for artists and audiences to mingle.

PORTICO recently met with Pfitzer, also a documentary filmmaker currently filming a piece on women's professional football in Alabama, at her office to talk about the upcoming festival.

PORTICO: The mission of the festival is to bring films to Birmingham that people here would otherwise not have a chance to see. What are some examples of this? **PFITZER:** Before "Napoleon Dynamite" was "Napoleon Dynamite," it was a short film called "Palooka" that we showed. We showed it as "Napoleon Dynamite" before it got picked up by MTV for distribution. That's sort of the way it works for independent films. They're shown on the film circuit. "Napoleon Dynamite" was shown at Sundance, and because of its popularity, it got picked up. We showed the film "Supersize Me" because it would not otherwise get here. This is a strange market. We're the biggest city in the state, but still as far as distribution is concerned, a lot of films don't come here because we don't have an art house cinema. There's no venue. A few of the indie films come here, but it's really only if there's a huge star in them—if they have some mass appeal. But we try to have special screenings throughout the year.

What have some challenges been along the way? As a non-profit organization, funding is always an issue. But also getting the fans mobilized in the same place at the same time in order to declare their support by attending is a challenge because we really do have something for everyone. There are seven venues all simultaneously screening different things, so folks who come down are going to find something they like.



Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival 2007

A Cinematic Celebration on the City Streets of Birmingham

BY LANIER SCOTT ISOM
PHOTO BY JASON WALLIS

With new leadership, is there a new vision for the festival? We're not trying to reinvent the festival. It's successful as it is. The new aspect is civil rights, which just makes sense for Birmingham to be a hub of civil rights films. This year we are launching a civil and human rights sidebar for the first time. We are partnering with the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and screening many of those films there, so that's very exciting. It's an addition to everything else, which has stayed consistent.

How would you describe the film community in Birmingham? It has become mobilized primarily because of the festival. While bringing new films to new audiences is our mission, the festival also encourages film and filmmaking in the state of Alabama. We have a burgeoning film community that is growing all the time. Sidewalk puts on a monthly networking meeting for filmmakers



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to get together, meet each other, collaborate, discuss potential projects they're working on, and find other collaborators for those projects. Clearly, there was a need that we filled.

What are the strengths and weaknesses within the film community?

The strengths are that the film community is incredibly mobilized. They talk to one another and utilize each other's resources. You know, "I'll work on your film if you work on my film kind of thing." So that's one. The cooperation is one of the huge strengths. Probably the weakness is the lack of business savvy behind the films—finding the funding, you know, all of those things that are less of the art of it. The business side is really what the next step is, I think.

What have been some surprises along the way?

I guess it was in 2002 when we took sort of a different route with our opening night film and had a big name film, "Sweet Home Alabama," as our opening film which was sold out and the best attended opening night we'd ever had. Yet the backlash of that is that it wasn't an independent film. That was an unexpected response because everyone came out for it, but it was a film that was going to come here anyway. A lot of the religious-oriented films do very well regardless of whether they are pro or con, regardless of what they say. "Jesus Camp" was hugely popular at the festival last year, and there was an MTV telling of the Old Testament called "The Real Old Testament." It was a narrative shot in the manner of "The Real World." That was hugely popular. Last year we had a documentary called "The Trials of Daryl Hunt," which was about a man who was wrongly convicted again and again. It won. The Jury Award and the Audience Choice Award in the documentary feature film category, which was the impetus for our realizing there was a strong interest in human and civil -rights oriented films, and it would make so much sense for us to have a programs here in Birmingham, Alabama where we have the Civil Rights Institute.

What hurdles do you see you have to overcome? Every year, we try to reach outside the demographic that comes to the festival. Right now, 80 percent of the folks who come have more than a high school education, and there's a higher percentage of white people. There are so many films that would appeal to so many people. We are trying to reach out to the communities that don't usually attend because it's not part of their culture or they don't know about it.

Have you ever excluded a film that went on to make it big at another festival? We have, and we showed it the next year. It had gone through some editing after we'd seen it. Not only does the film have to be good, but you have to consider the composite picture. You can't have two really good films on tuna fishing. It's often that we can't show all of the ones we would show. We have to consider the best of the best given that particular topic, and likewise, a lot of films that may not have otherwise been programmed may be pulled back in to fill a certain slot once the program is pulled together and there's a missing piece.

After the festival, what kind of access do people have to the films showcased? At the end of the festival, we have an encore screening of what was popular. But other than that you have to wait and see if it's picked up by a distributor. A lot of films in the past have been picked up by cable. Or you can wait for it to go to DVD, if that happens. ◉

The 9th annual Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival, showcasing approximately 100 films from an entry pool of 700, chosen by screening committees comprised of members of the community, will be held Sept. 28-30 and will offer short films, features, documentaries and children's films on a variety of topics and genres.