

# VINEYARD GAZETTE

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## Crowd Wowed by Chilmark Film Festival

By JULIA RAPPAPORT

A young filmmaker perched on a stool in the Chilmark Community Center Saturday afternoon, microphone in hand. An Island woman born and raised, she waited for the lights to flicker on and then watched, her eyes twinkling, as the members of the audience joined in steady round of applause for her film about her Island and featuring the people who call it home.



New members and old see the world from couches in Community Center.

Filmmaker Liz Witham and her partner and husband Ken Wentworth were just two of the 12 filmmakers who turned out this weekend for the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival. Their 45-minute documentary, *A Home For Us All*, about the struggle to find affordable housing on Martha's Vineyard, was just one of the nearly 30 films shown in a whirlwind 72 hours. It was one documentary in a program packed with feature-length films and shorts, Academy Award-winning exposés, even a musical romantic comedy. It was the only film in the festival from local directors and it held its own among movies from Russia, France and the U.K.

The film touted the importance of preserving the Island culture yet its theme was universal. "To save the character of the community, you have to save the characters of the community," Darrill Bazy, Aquinnah resident and member of the Dukes County Regional Housing Authority, said in the film.

The Martha's Vineyard Film Festival began eight winters ago when Thomas Bena, a young carpenter exasperated with the limited local cinematic offerings, and a cohort of fellow film fans decided to take action. They were motivated by more than just the desire to see good films. They believed the characters of this community needed to be saved.

They organized a film festival in the middle of March, a time when the pace of Island life can slow to an almost painful rate. They dragged their friends and

their families, strangers from on the Island and off, out of their homes to talk about film, to share a meal together, to simply come together as a community.

Over time the festival has grown. But the characters of the community have remained its backbone.

The doors to the Community Center opened at 6 p.m. on Friday evening and the space was barely recognizable. Filled with couches and comfy chairs, swaths of fabric hung from the ceiling and a deejay from Philly was spinning a steady beat from turntables in a corner. "When I walked in, I texted [my sister] and was like, 'The center has a lounge!'" laughed seasonal resident Gabriella Herman, who spent her childhood summers as a center camper and later as a counselor. "It is just completely transformed."

Ms. Herman, a photographer, lives in New York city and frequently attends film screenings and festivals there. But it is this Vineyard festival on which she relies for her quality dose of cinematic culture. "I can always say, I saw it first on the Vineyard," she said.

After an opening reception where summer residents caught up with year-round friends over plates heaped high with Cuban chicken, organic lamb burgers and freshly baked cookies, all whipped up by Daniele Dominick of the Scottish Bakehouse, the crowds moved into the main hall.

Mr. Bena greeted returning faces and first-time festivalgoers alike. "Welcome to the eighth annual Martha's Vineyard Film Festival," he said triumphantly before introducing guest director Brad Westcott, formerly of Magnolia Pictures and the Boston Jewish Film Festival.

The lights dimmed and the audience settled into their seats for the opening film, *The Dhamma Brothers*. A shot of a high-security Alabama prison filled the screen and, for the next 75 minutes, the audience sat captivated, pausing only to munch on popcorn or search for much-needed tissues. The film documents the journey made together by a handful of inmates as they took part in an experimental 10-day silent meditation program inside prison walls.

Film director Jenny Phillips was on hand afterwards to take comments and questions from the audience. "I wanted someone to see what I saw and felt what I felt," the first-time filmmaker said when asked why she chose to tell her story through film. "I didn't know how to show what you saw tonight if it wasn't in film." The evening continued with stories which could only be told on the big screen.

Saturday morning, the sky was dark and soon, rain drops fell. It was a perfect day for the movies.

The day began locally with a screening of *Home For Us All* and a platter of muffins made with North Tabor Farm eggs. It continued nationally with

documentaries about voting, about love, and about a great American surfer. The last drew a crowd larger than the number of seats available, but for the first time in festival history, Mr. Bena refused to turn people away. "In the past we had to send people back down-Island," he said, This year, Mr. Bena marched next door to the Chilmark Library and set up a simulcast for more than 20 guests, including a filmmaker whose work had screened earlier in the day.

In this festival, directors get no VIP list. They wait in line for the bathroom and sit on couches with the fishermen, the lawyers and the students, even if those couches are in the overflow room. Still they revel in the festival; all the dozen filmmakers who came not only fielded questions after their screenings but also joined together for a fascinating, free, hour-long forum Saturday afternoon of discussion about their craft, process and motivations.

"What's exciting," said local oral historian Linsey Lee, "is it reawakens your mind to different ways of telling stories. It reminds you of the importance of telling stories." Ms. Lee was there with her daughter Mya, age three. The two grabbed a bag of popcorn before heading over to the library, which by day was a playground for pint-sized film buffs. This year, for the first time, Mr. Bena and his crew offered a mini-festival for a young crowd, including classics and new movies, all for free.

On Sunday, audiences turned out to travel overseas with a short film on farming in Cuba, a documentary from an Indian immigrant to England, a revealing expos é on prisoners of war, a story about a Russian girl, and a packed program of short films curated by Jeremy Mayhew. "These films would never play here if they were not brought here by the festival," said Island filmmaker Len Morris as he sat down to watch *Taxi to the Dark Side*, the winner of the Oscar this year for best documentary. "The films are clearly very carefully chosen. They are films made with conviction. As you sit here, you are almost watching awareness take hold."

"We really wanted to mix it up so that people could go on a journey," Mr. Bena said following the festival. It was a journey through film, but the passport was community. Throughout the weekend, guests lingered at the center after films ended and before they began, between double or even triple-features. They debated and laughed, argued and cried while discussing the movies they had seen. "It just is really about our community, getting together, hanging out," Mr. Bena said. "The proof is in the pudding. You could taste it when you walked into that room."

The feeling was contagious. For the past couple years, the festival has held steady with 120 members who pay annual dues and receive discounted admission to festival screenings as well as to movies shown throughout the summer months. Over the course of the weekend, 85 new members signed up, almost doubling membership. T-shirts and sweatshirts sold out, and Mr. Bena estimated a record-breaking crowd of 3,000.

“I am so proud that Chilmark has this film festival,” said Warren Doty, chairman of the Chilmark selectmen, who took in a few films in the main hall and wandered over to catch a couple at the library with his grandchild. “It’s a first-class film festival that would be a first-class festival in any location.”

Just days after the festival wrapped, Mr. Bena and Mr. Westcott had not slowed down. They are already brainstorming ways to provide the Island community with an even steadier stream of films. They hope to begin screening monthly selections at the Capawock Theatre in Vineyard Haven and are firming up the schedule for the Wednesday films which show at the center every week in July and August. It is work Mr. Bena relishes, work that brings together the elements — film, friends and food — which make his life sparkle. “I honestly just feel incredibly lucky to be calling this my work,” he said.