

Aurora Filmmakers win big at Multimedia Film Festival



By Brock Weir

It is not too often students can have the last laugh on a teacher in such a public way, but Renqiu Chen, Zach Reich, and Lauren Strathdee, did so in a very big way last week.

The Grade 8 students at Aurora Senior Public School, along with fellow student Myko Smith, took home first place honours for Best Drama in their age category, at the York Region Multimedia Film Festival.

Aurora Senior Public School students have been very active participants in the annual film festival since its inception with a number of entries coming in this year ? and they were not the only students nominated.

Their teacher, says Renqiu, wasn't too crazy about the ending of their film, which upends stereotypes about bullying to look at it from both the perspective of the perpetrator and the victim.

?Our teacher gave us a 4-minus and he said there are other kids in our class who are here today who got 4-plusses, and he told us before we came, ?If you beat them, I'll change your mark to a 4-plus.?"

And the rest, as they say, is history.

The quartet got their idea from a wide array of videos of people hunched over their webcams talking about their life experiences. They decided that rather than just showing the victim (Lauren) pouring her heart out to the world, they would also give the bully (Zach) a chance to speak his mind. In the end, the short film shows less what divides them than what ultimately brings them together.

?I think our school is fortunate to be an accepting group of kids from Grades 4 ? 8,? says Lauren. ?We don't really witness a lot of bullying behind the scenes.?"

Adds Zach: ?But there are groups of kids that I see go through a lot, have a tough time making friends, and sometimes bully.?"

While this was a first time entry for the four students at Aurora Senior Public School, it was almost old hat for Aurora-born

comedian Sara Hennessey whose short "Terrific Women (1974)" took home First Place for Best Comedy.

Featuring both Sara and her comedy partner Steph Kaliner, the video is a spoof of stereotypes often associated with feminism in the 1970s.

"It was a time when women were just trying to take control and do it for themselves," she says, with a laugh. "But, it was just a silly time because, well, polyester was big and so were key parties! I do stand-up, but when I do sketch comedy, I like to go all crazy with the costumes, the wigs, the makeup and the whole showmanship aspect to it. It was all about having a great time in vintage stores, finding a great outfit, being silly with a lot of jokes, and just grabbing someone who could use a camera!"

The youngest of three children growing up in Aurora, and with two older brothers to boot, she was raised on a steady diet of Kids in the Hall, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien. Comedy was big in that family and she says she often found herself to be the loudest person in the room.

"I'm not going to be a librarian with this voice!" she laughs.

After attending Light of Christ Catholic Elementary School in Aurora, rather than following her friends to Cardinal Carter, she instead went into the Arts York Drama Program at Unionville High School in Grade 9. She says she was terrified to go it alone, but excited to find a creative outlet. There, she truly found her niche in comedy, eventually going to open-mic night at Yuk Yuks. Fast forward 12 years, and she is still doing what she loves.

"A lot of women say [Terrific Women (1974)] is a big throwback for them, that they remembered when they thought it was healthy to eat that way and just constantly smoke cigarettes like there was no problem, when there were no car seats for children! I think women who were probably in their 20s or 30s then like it because it is a bit of a cheeky throwback."

For those watching the video today, who might have heard about these feminist tropes from their mothers or grandmothers, Sarah encourages them to grab a camera, grab a few friends, and make videos to find what really turns you on.

"It is about getting involved and finding like-minded people, especially for performance arts. Try auditioning. Maybe you'll get a McDonalds commercial to pay for it the rest of your life!"

Taking a more serious approach to things is the not-so-serious Alex Broughton whose film "Grasping For Straws" was named Best Drama in the professional category. It follows many characters throughout the course of the day in an examination of race, money, and urban life. It was a film which almost didn't see the light of day after the film "yes, this was done on film rather than digital" was damaged in the process.

For Alex, the win shows you can do anything you put your mind to.

"The hardest thing is figuring out your priorities in life and creating a balance to both find your place and accomplish your goal [while exploring] life and figure out all its assets and facets that this experience can amount to," he says. "Being able to finish a film that some people said was unsalvageable is good for that feeling of accomplishment and, at the same time, the reasons why the film had its problems in the beginning was the same topic the film was about which was a lack of funding, a lack of ability to get projects going."