

First Nations and water issues headline Hospice film fest

By William Kilpatrick

On Monday, June 23 Hospice hosted their first documentary film festival at the Village Play House with all proceeds going to Hospice house. Those in attendance were treated to four powerful and moving films, three of which were Canadian. The opening film by director Alanis Obomsawin was entitled *Hi-Ho Mistahey!* (2013) that, roughly translated from Cree, means 'I love you very much.' The film explored the situation surrounding the education of First Nations youth in Canada. The main focus was on the Attawapiskat reserve in northern Ontario and a young girl named Shannen Koostachin whose drive and ambition to see her reserve get a new 'safe and comfortable' school gave rise to a movement called 'Shannen's Dream.' Although this is a movie with a message of hope it also showcased the appalling and often inhumane conditions that continue to plague First Nation peoples. Barbara Shaw, one of the organizers, said that the hope of showing movies such as *Hi-Ho Mistahey* was that they would impact people's psyches and consciences in such a way that it would drive them to take action for positive change, 'People will wake up in the middle of the night after seeing a movie like this [*Hi-Ho Mistahey*] and go, I need to do something.'

One of the startling statistics that came to light during the film was the disparity between education funding for First Nations children and non-natives. First Nations children receive roughly \$8,000 per student whereas non-natives receive \$15,000 per student. Harold Eastman, one of the patrons, was clearly moved by the film. Eastman, a passionate advocate for education, observed that poor education impacts us all as it has reverberations that 'echo all the way down [through a society].' Although Eastman stated that it was a film that had 'heart' he added that 'It's [also] a film that made me uncomfortable because I don't know what to do [to improve things].' It has been said that shame is a revolutionary feeling and it is hard to feel anything but shame after observing Obomsawin's film whose main message was, 'you can judge the quality of a nation by how it treats its children.'

The other films were equally thought provoking and interesting. *Burt's Buzz* (2013), a film by Jody Shapiro explored the life of bee keeper Burt Shavitz the Co-founder of Burt's Bees brand products. Shavitz, who has benefited very little from the now billion dollar business, continues to live a quiet life in Maine living off the land and residing in a renovated turkey coop. *Finding Vivian Maier* (2013) chronicles the life of Vivian Maier, whose work as a street photographer was discovered posthumously by chance when 26 year-old John Maloof purchased some of her negatives at an auction. Maloof then shared them with the world propelling Maier to international fame. The final film by Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky was entitled *Watermark* (2013). *Watermark* is a breathtaking look at how humans manipulate water and how water manipulates us. The cinematography by landscape photographer Burtynsky leaves you in awe of the power and necessity of our greatest natural resource.

Hospice program co-ordinator Heather Brough was optimistic that this film fest would be the first of many. Brough explained that the festival was a 'test run to see if there is an interest.' She went on to point out that the idea of a documentary film festival has been in the works for some four years since they started showing Toronto International Film Festival films. Brough was quick to point out that without the community partners, the Playhouse operating committee and the generous donation by the Black Fly Theatre none of it would have been possible. She did express some frustration about the numbers who came out to enjoy the films saying that 'people talk [about wanting a film fest] but do they show up?' Regardless of the turnout, Brough is determined to make it work and is already looking for other avenues that would benefit the entire region such as a children's film fest.

Look for another documentary film fest coming soon to a Village Play House near you.