

# Film groups partner to promote youth filmmaking

SARNIA THIS WEEK

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Bob Dell (left), LaFFF Youth Short Film Festival's Scott Ferguson and Ron Van Horne, and Lambton County Creative Fund's Tara Pounds will be combining forces in the coming months and years to provide filmmaking opportunities for local youth. PHOTO BY CARL HNATYSHYN – SARNIA THIS WEEK

Local youth interested in pursuing a career in film have received a big boost as members of cineSarnia, the Lambton Food and Film Festival (LaFFF), that festival's Student Short Film Competition and the South Western International Film Festival (SWIFF) joined forces to coordinate their youth-focused seminars, activities, skills development symposiums and workshops to encourage the development of a greater film presence in Lambton County.

With additional financial and logistical assistance coming from Lambton County's Creative County Fund, the groups will pool their resources to provide cinematic

educational opportunities for the county's nascent actors, directors, screenwriters, camera operators and graphic artists.

The partnership comes on the heels of a successful LaFFF Youth Short Film Festival this past spring – in its third year – which showcased talent from among high school-aged youth in Lambton, said competition founder Ron Van Horne.

“It was just something great to watch,” he said. “The kids in the program are such believers, they're so passionate about it. We typically kick off the festival with the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) instructors coming in – we're only one of two or three communities in the province that TIFF instructors go to for a satellite program – and then we have 50 students from across the county come in for instruction.

“Many of the kids, if not most of them, are interested in going off and pursuing careers in film, in editing, in acting. Some of them just want to learn how to use the technology,” Van Horne continued. “And this year, after the formal part of their lessons, the instructors asked 'do you have any questions?' And we had about 23 of 25 students who attended each of the two sessions stay behind, after class, and ask so many detailed questions. So there's obviously a real interest in filmmaking here in Lambton County.”

“Each year that we run this, I'm just blown away by the natural skills, the talent and the creativity that these students possess,” added LaFFF's Glen Starkey. “There are so many creative, intelligent students in the county and we want to make sure that they can see that there's a potential for that as a career going forward. It's really a lot of fun to see that and anything we can do to encourage that is just great.”

Initially, when it began back in 2014, the short film festival was not focused on area youth, but after the involvement of the Forest Optimists, the festival became a training ground for young, aspiring filmmakers, Van Horne said.

“Before the first year of the competition, the film festival came and asked Optimist Club for money to host a short competition,” he said. “It was fairly successful, so in the second year when they came back to ask for some money, we told them that the Optimists motto is Friends of Youth. We said 'We'll give you money but we want to add a youth element to it'. So that's when we came up with the idea of hosting the youth short film competition.”

“And since then, it's gone extremely well,” Van Horne continued. “The first year we were heavily dependent on basically two parties to get us the vast majority of films. And we've gone from that to having virtually all the high schools participating in the program and we have all four school boards participating, too.”

Now, partnering up with other local film groups, the annual youth film festival is set to become an even more inclusive and a much larger event, Ferguson said. Along with providing financial support for the festival, cineSarnia will also be providing two of its committee members as judges during the competition.

“I think it's something that will benefit everybody,” said cineSarnia's Bob Dell. “As a group we had been talking with LaFFF's Glen Starkey about working together... and while we were talking about that, we became aware of this short film competition.”

“What I like about it is that it doesn't depend on scholarship, it's open to any adolescent who is interested in making film,” he continued. “And let's face it – people who are creative and who are interested in becoming filmmakers aren't necessarily the people who are getting the top marks in school. But that's not what we want to encourage. We want to encourage creativity and we want to give young people a real hands-on opportunity and we feel that this is a perfect forum for that.”

“Some of our winners in the past have taken their films and used them as their project for submission to get into film programs in college level programs,” added the youth film festival's Scott Ferguson. “Our first year winner for the animated film category got into Sheridan College in part because of the film he made for the festival. We've had others who have won awards and who have been offered jobs on the basis of their work.”

“I grew up with the Kiwanis Music Festival of London and there's no reason why we can't make this the equivalent in film,” Ferguson continued. “Everybody has access to technology, it can be a lot of fun and there's a real positive social and economic impact from this kind of activity. I'd like to grow into a much, much bigger event.”

For its part, SWIFF will continue to encourage and engage youth interested in various aspects of filmmaking both by hosting its highly-popular and highly-focused yearly series of film workshops (free for youth) during its November run, as well as by extending an open invitation to high school students and teachers to participate in the festival's annual free day of film.

The workshops will allow young people considering a career in film to receive solid advice and expertise from established authorities in their field, while the free film day will let students see films created by a rich and diverse set of artists, said SWIFF organizer Ravi Srinivasan.

“One of the mandates is to engage youth in the community and the second part of our mandate is to bring diverse stories and diverse artists to the community as well,” he said. “And through these two initiatives, that's exactly what we're doing.”

High school classes are invited to take in two documentaries during the next iteration of SWIFF, Srinivasan said.

“The first thing that we're doing is offering free films for high school students, which kicks off the festival on Thursday, Nov. 2,” he said. “It's an invitation to all classrooms and teachers across Lambton County. This year our programming is focusing on indigenous issues, so we're showing a really successful documentary from last year, Angry Inuk, and we'll be Skyping in the filmmaker, Aletha Arnaquq-Baril, following the screening. And that particular film is a great opportunity to spark discussion on a

number of subjects, including environmental issues, law, civics, media and other disciplines.”

“The other film we're showing is a documentary from a few years ago called Reel Injun, directed by Canadian Neil Diamond and that film takes a critical look at how indigenous people have been portrayed in the past in cinema, back from the classic Hollywood era to now,” he continued. “When we've done this in past years, the feedback we've gotten has been amazing. Students getting the chance to talk with the directors, the actors, right after the screening is an amazing experience for them. It's inspiring and there's a real buzz among the students.”

This year's SWIFF workshops will focus on three unique subjects, all meaningful for aspiring young filmmakers, Srinivasan said: print and online writing for women, composing music for film (led by successful Sarnia pianist Erica Procutier) and documentary filmmaking. Members of both cineSarnia and LaFFF will be attending the workshops in order to promote their youth initiatives as well.

“We're really excited about the workshops coming up this year,” he said “We're doing print and online writing workshop for women workshop this year led by Kiva Reardon, an accomplished writer and a programmer at both TIFF and the Miami International Film Festival. The workshop will focus on what it's like for women and young women to find their space and create their own voice.”

For Creative County Fund's Tara Pounds, the combination of programs and skills-development seminars that the various film groups are offering to local youth is something truly unique, which is why the organization is contributing to this initiative.

“We saw the tremendous opportunity here,” she said. “In terms of the film competition, it really is a transformative program that they're offering to youth. And to connect that program with cineSarnia, the Lambton Film and Food Festival and SWIFF, it just creates a greater film presence within Lambton County.”

“These are opportunities that youth here would otherwise not have access to,” Pounds continued. “Really everything that's been said here – animation, creativity, innovation, creating opportunities – is what the fund is about. And we want to create a stronger film presence in Lambton County and work collaboratively with all these organizations. We don't have the resources or programming in Lambton County right now to offer this to youth, so this is really opening a door for them to inspire creativity and to follow their passion.”

The partnership between the various film groups will pay dividends in the years to come, Starkey said, as young people begin see that there is a way to develop their skills locally.

“The reach we're looking for is big and we're just hoping that by teaming up with these other organizations, we can get that done,” he said. “Whenever you get people working

on the same thing, it's always better for people to work together rather than to work apart.”

For more information about the Lambton Film and Food Festival, visit [www.forestfestivals.ca](http://www.forestfestivals.ca), for more information about cineSarnia, visit [www.cinesarnia.com](http://www.cinesarnia.com), and for more information about SWIFF, visit [www.swiff.ca](http://www.swiff.ca).

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