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Starfish, starlight, starbright

By Bethel Swift

Chicago Editor



Chicago—It wasn't just the fact that the films *Brother, Brother*; *Pushover*, *TV Eddie* and *Up in Smoke* premiered to constant talking and giggling by the stars, that stayed with audience members at the first West Side screening for Starfish Studios 2006 Film Class. Even during their films' hour-long premier, the kids—ranging in age from nine to 16—gave their friends, and any audience members sitting near them, running commentary on their film making experience.

An audience of about 200 crowded into Beidler Elementary School to view the films. The evening started with a humorous short about gang violence, in which the victims (including a boy dressed up in an oversized diaper and pretending to be a baby) were whip-cream-pied by bicycle riding thugs.

After a speech by Executive Director, Scott Parker, and a brief intermission, it was time to debut this year's films. Each film was three scenes in length, and all relating to the theme of identity crisis.

Brother, Brother, compares two older brothers and the way they see themselves protecting their younger sisters. One looks after his sister and warns her not to even watch when a drug transaction is taking place, while the other turns to gang retaliation after his sister is beat up. The film shows how subtle gang recruitment can be, and how early it starts. In *Pushover*, Frankie, a young teenager wants to fit in with his new friends and begins picking

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on a little girl that he used to tutor. When a mentor challenges him about the incident and the little girl refuses to retaliate, Frankie rethinks who his friends really are.



Andrew Figgins, who is in his third year of volunteering with Starfish, directed *TV Eddie*, the film voted "best picture" by the audience. He joked that his film wasn't originally supposed to be a silent film, but that "it kind of dictated that in editing." Figgins' film is about a boy who has a dream of being a television anchor. When he reveals his dream to friends, he is rejected and must decide if his dream is worth pursuing in spite of ridicule.

Shantel Grant, 14, an actress in *TV Eddie*, joked that she didn't have to do much acting for her role as a bully, because bullying comes naturally for her. Still, she concedes, "It's hard being an actress. You have to practice everyday and do scenes over and over again."

The last film, *Up in Smoke*, struck a chord with many in the audience. Rachel Marshall, 15, played one of the teens that pressure a young girl to smoke marijuana in the film. She describes the dilemma that Tasha, the film's main character faces: "She wants to fit in with this guy and he smokes, but in the end, she chooses to keep her identity." Marshall says the hardest thing she learned from her acting experience was, "how to look like I was smoking."



Parker says many of his kids are attracted to the class because of the Hollywood focus on celebrities. "I think a lot of the kids show up for that, but we are trying to create a product and philosophy that is very different." Parker explains. "I ask myself, 'If Jesus were running a movie production company, what would it look like?'"

Parker remembers ~~that~~ when he first watched *Invisible Children*, a documentary that exposes the use of children to fight the war in Uganda. Upon showing the film to the kids at his school, it touched them so much that one boy asked, "Mr. Parker, how come you're not crying?"

"Our first year we found out about an orphanage in Uganda," says Parker. "I called our kids together and said: 'We have \$300 saved up for our end of the year party, or we could give it to them.' The kids right away said: 'Lets give it.'"

*For more information on Starfish, visit: www.starfishstudios.org.

Above photos of Starfish Studio students during classes

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