

Neighbors

Chester County

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ART REVIEW

Art exhibit with conscience

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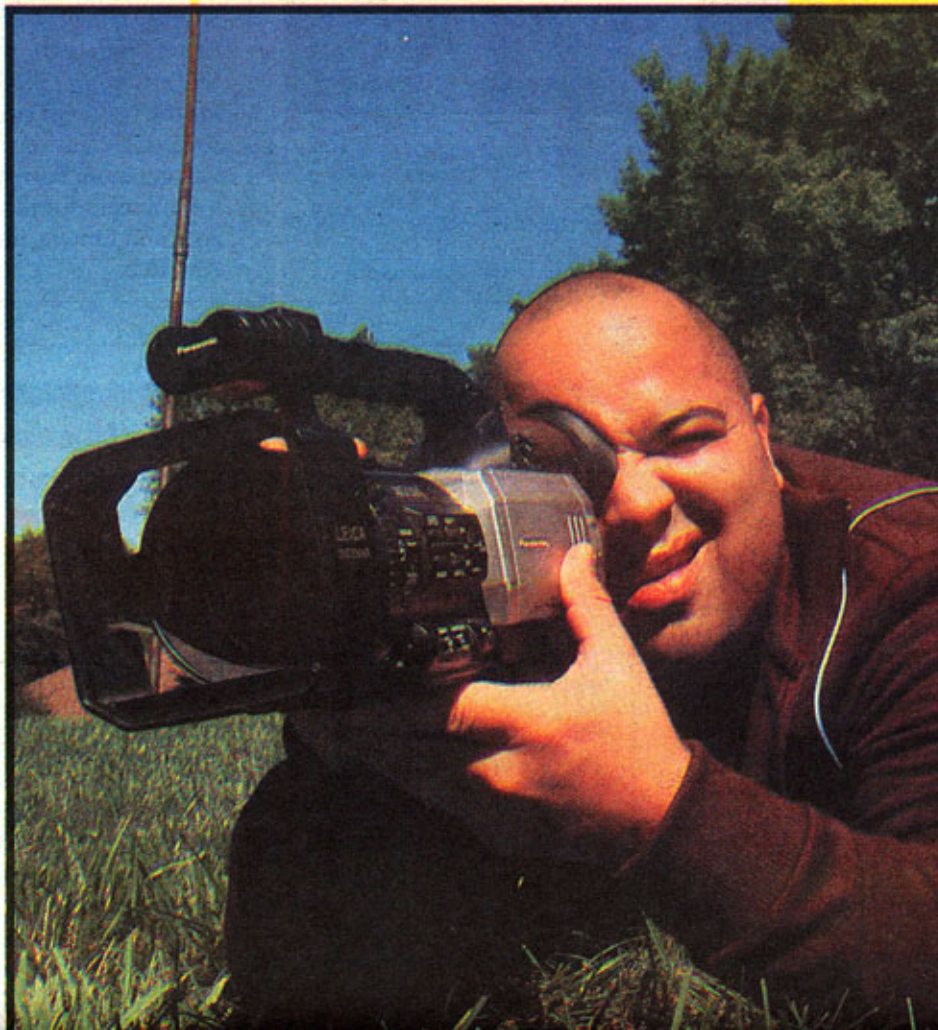
BEING YOUNG

Teen scene

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W. Chester nurtures filmmaking

A festival of shorts will play at four venues this week. Organizers hope to draw 3,000 people.

By Helen I. Hwang
FOR THE INQUIRER

"I've always wanted to do something important with my life, and art films are going to be the next level of films," said Caesar Augustus, 27, whose short work is appearing at this week's West Chester Film Festival.

Augustus' 15-minute short, titled *8*, is about an Olympic athlete who sees his life flash before him in the last eight minutes of his life. While Augustus handled the cinematography, music and editing, his older brother, Jean Paul Labbe, directed, wrote and starred in the film.

The two grew up in Downingtown and shot part of their film in a historic house in Wagontown, which they portrayed as a castle dungeon.

During the four-day film marathon, there will be workshops, gala parties, and more than 90 shorts playing at four venues in downtown West Chester. The festival aims "to focus on filmmakers and give them the opportunity to showcase their work," explained John Cigler, the festival's public relations chairman.

Each block of films, spanning an hour and a half, will include six to nine shorts, from dramas to comedies. A handcrafted glass Chester statue, the festival's version of an Oscar, will be awarded to filmmakers in various categories, including a People's Choice Award.

This will be the third year of the West Chester Film Festival. The first year drew 1,100 people. Last year, about 1,300 people attended. Laura Barton-Vely, president of the



Above, in Caesar Augustus' "*8*," Philip D'Gracie (left) plays Jonathan; Augustus' brother, Jean Paul Labbe, is Christopher. Below, Larry's Mendte's "*Stand for Hope*" is about Alex Scott and her lemonade stand.

festival, is confident the turnout would have been higher last year if not for the "torrential rains. You needed to take a canoe to the venue," she joked.

This year, the festival organizers are aiming for 3,000 people. "Each year, it's gotten better and better. Better films, more people, better workshops," Barton-Vely said.

The idea of a local film festival sprang from a committee formed to bring a theater to West Chester in 2003. Barton-Vely was on that committee, which has since disbanded.

One major goal of the festival is to prove to major theater companies and potential financial investors that West Chester can support a movie theater. After this festival is over, Barton-Vely plans "to develop a committee to go to the theater people" and persuade them that the festival's track record is evidence the area can sustain a film venue.

"For the last two years, the West Chester Film Festival has

been a great event added to our long list of nice downtown events," says Ernie McNeely, West Chester's borough manager of 19 years. "It creates revenue for businesses and merchants."

"West Chester Film Festival has big dreams, and that's what I'm about," Augustus said at his home office in Glen Mills, surrounded by several computer and TV monitors. The red logo for Augustus Films looms large in a metal frame above his work station. Augustus and his brother plan on starting preproduction for a feature film, which they hope to release next October. The festival's staff has been "really supportive" of their efforts, Augustus added.

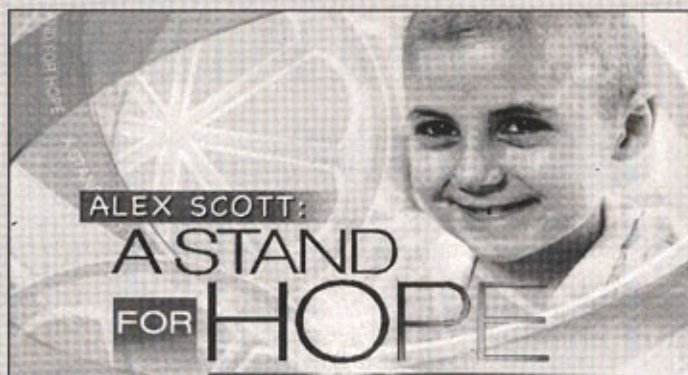
Larry Mendte, CBS-3's evening news anchor, wrote and directed two shorts, which will premiere at the festival. One is about Alex Scott, the girl who started Alex's Lemonade Stand and later died of cancer, and the other is about Ben Franklin's legendary kite experiment with lightning.

This year, there were about 250 festival entries, some from as far as Ireland, South Korea and Australia.

There's also been an "upswing in women filmmakers," Cigler noted. About a quarter of the submissions were from women. The Regional Center for Women in the Arts is awarding a \$500 cash prize to the best female filmmaker.

Last year, Coatesville also held a film festival, but it won't be holding one this year, due to funding issues. The Coatesville Area Alliance, which organized it last year, is planning on holding a film festival in November 2007, in conjunction with the Western Chester County Chamber of Commerce's Vanity Fair event.

Barton-Vely's message to Chester County residents: "If you want a theater, come out and help support it. This is the make-or-break year. We need it to be successful, as much for our morale and for drawing a theater here."



If You Go to the Festival

Highlights of the festival include Caesar Augustus' *8*, which will be shown at Friday 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Chester County Historical Society, 225 N. High St., West Chester, and Saturday noon to 1:30 p.m. at the Masonic Lodge, 10 S. Church St. Larry Mendte's *Benjamin Franklin: Stealing Lightning* will be shown on Saturday 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Knights of Columbus, 113 W. Market St., and next Sunday noon to 1:30 p.m. at the Chester County Historical Society. Mendte's *Alex Scott: A Stand for Hope* will be shown on Saturday 9:30 to 11 p.m. at the Knights of Columbus and next Sunday, 2:30 to 4 p.m. at the Chester County Historical Society.

The festival runs from Thursday to next Sunday at several venues in downtown West Chester. For complete information, go to www.westchesterfilmfestival.com. Ticket prices are \$7 per film block, \$6 for senior citizens and students.

ON THE COVER

Caesar Augustus operates his video camera near his home in Thornbury Township. Inquirer photo by Bob Williams.