

How to Grow a Film Festival or Home Town Boy Makes Good

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By Cynthia Close

Ben Fowlie, was fresh out of Emerson College Film School when he walked in to my office over 8 years ago and asked me point blank if I've ever sponsored a film festival under DER's non-profit umbrella - fiscal sponsorship program. He stopped me short, and my wheels started turning. He went on to say he wanted to return to his hometown of Camden Maine to start a festival for non-fiction film. He'd done his homework, and realized he'd have to raise a considerable amount of money to reach his goal. We talked about his options and came to the conclusion that this was a great idea; home town boy makes good and comes back to bring a major cultural event to one of the most beautiful coastal towns in New England, home (at least during the summers) to some of the wealthier and better educated individuals in the North East who we figured would most welcome a film festival in their midst.

While we both knew that non-profit status would be essential in raising donor money, forming your own successful non-profit was no easy task and would put considerable amount of pressure, in terms of time and administrative know how to simultaneously build the connections and infrastructure needed to run both a year round organization as well as the annual, seasonal event. I was so impressed by Ben's focus and clarity of vision, I decided to take a chance on him. We traditionally have supported filmmakers, making films, not events, but since this obviously advanced our mission as an organization, there was a rationale for our supporting Ben and we jumped on his bandwagon.

The first Camden International Film Festival launched in 2005. It was a modest affair, but Ben had done a great job in programming

and had partnered with Leah Hurley, CIFF's producer, who helped him take the plunge. She assisted with the business side of things, organizing a course through the University of Maine's New Media Department that is still going strong, and which helps to support the educational aspects of the program. Ben was learning on the job and there were many ups and downs, both in his internal organization, as well as figuring out how to navigate the complexities of getting funding and support from the local business community.

That first festival proved to both us and to Ben, that this was doable, then the issues of whether it was actually sustainable began to crop up. I would have occasional meetings with Ben throughout the year, when he sought advice. There were times when he looked like he hadn't slept in days and as he was approaching the date of the 3rd annual Camden International Film Festival (CIFF), he came close to throwing in the towel and just giving up. Fund raising had become nearly a full time job and he hadn't paid himself any salary so had to keep up a steady stream of paying gigs to support his real love and focus as the festival programmer. I knew he had hit a low point and that this was a crucial year. It is fairly typical that any new business venture has to allow at least 5 years before you might hope to see a profit or at least until the venture is self sustaining. Ben had come so far in such a short time, I tried to encourage him to stick with it, but at the same time be realistic about the funding side of the equation. He had gradually built strong support in the local business community and we could see that was growing. The twin towns of Camden/Rockport were also home to the well established Film and Photography Workshops that had helped to bring a community of media makers to the area in past years.

Ben somehow managed to get through this period of self-doubt and has gone on to build one of the most successful enterprises of its type in the USA today. He was a constant learner who sought out and attended the best film festivals around. He thought BIG and he

had an eye for quality. As a result the CIFF has become one of the best new film festivals to hit the scene in years, a standout at a time where regional film festivals seem to be popping up like mushrooms after a long rain.

In 2009 Ben launched the POINTS NORTH FILM FORUM which brought over 40 movers and shakers from the international documentary film community to Camden to participate in 2 days of panels and discussions that drew filmmakers both local and national. Everyone agreed this was a brilliant idea and would help the festival grow as well as provide a much needed service to the community of filmmakers we both supported. It was also at this point when Ben and his team were ready to form their own non-profit organization. They had matured; they had a successful track record and a rich program in place. I felt like a proud parent seeing their kid grow up and make good.

Sean Flynn, successful Boston based filmmaker, joined Ben this year to program the Points North Forum. I was lucky enough to attend and hang out with representatives from HBO, A&E IndieFilms, POV, ITVS, BBC, Sundance, and the Tribeca Film Foundation. It was an incredibly uplifting experience to stand in line with the crowds waiting to get in to the packed theaters, to sample the great food at the festival parties and events that all seemed to share in the excitement generated by the Festival. It is clear, that come October 2012, Camden Maine will be THE place to be if you want to experience some of the best independent documentary films being made today. Congratulations to Ben Fowlie and his amazing team for being a model of how to grow a film festival in your own hometown.