



Powered by  Limelight NETWORKS

Philadelphia Welcomes the First International Free Speech Film Festival

Margaret Chew Barringer, Philly's top poet-turned-cultural ambassador and the woman behind the event, has a long-term vision of what it can accomplish and what it can become.

By Matt Prigge

Posted May. 16, 2012 | Comments: 0 | [Add Comment](#)

Share this Story: [Tweet!](#)



Free China: The Courage to Believe

Let's get the strange bit out of the way up front: Only one film is being screened for the general public during the inaugural Free Speech Film Festival. That's a bit of a stretch to most people's understanding of the concept of a film festival. But Margaret Chew Barringer, the woman behind the event, has a long-term vision of what it can accomplish and what it can become.

In the wake of recent revolutions in the Middle East and Africa—and of international civil-rights debates ranging from Iran to America's own cities—she's determined that putting out a global call for films about those sorts of topics should be a powerful tool for spotlighting both the issues and the documentary storytellers

working hard to present them. “People are killing themselves for freedom,” says Barringer, the chairwoman of the nonprofit American INSIGHT, which is producing the festival. “We have a huge responsibility to do this well.”

In this case, “well” means a two-year-long build culminating on Wed., May 16, when attendees at the festival’s big awards ceremony at the American Philosophical Society will be treated to a screening of the as-yet-unrevealed winning film, a talk with its filmmaker, a presentation honoring the other five finalists, and speeches by luminaries that include former U.S. State Department policy director Anne-Marie Slaughter and longtime Philly radio DJ Bob Craig.

Of the six finalist films, five hail from America, though only two are set here. Oppression of women is the topic of both the Iranian-set *I Am Neda* and *A Balloon for Allah*, the fest’s lone foreign-produced work, which zeroes in on the Abrahamic religions in Cairo, Istanbul and Oslo, Norway. There are also films on Chinese human rights (*Free China: The Courage to Believe*), Afghanistan and Iraq (*This Is Where We Take Our Stand*), illegal surveillance by the U.S. government from the ’50s through the ’70s (*Cointelpro 101*) and, perhaps inevitably, Occupy Wall Street (*#whilewewatch*).

There’s talk of screening some more of the finalists over the summer, either in the city or online; there are also plans in the works to distribute them in schools for educational viewing. Barringer estimates that it takes about six years for a film festival to build a real name for itself, and she’s eager to let this one mature at its own pace.

“Quality is far more important than quantity right now,” she says. “The public is fed up with hype, and hungry for meaning.”

Barringer is a warm and approachable poet, filmmaker, multitasking organizer and technology cheerleader prone to chuckling. (Chatting about her work, the 66-year-old Philadelphia native laughs self-consciously while quoting Lady Gaga about “looking for the edge of people’s nervous systems.”)

In 1983, Barringer founded the American Poetry Center, which sought to make art more accessible through then-budding forms of technology. Under her watch, the organization sponsored readings, classes, symposia—and, eventually, a seven-year-long cultural exchange with the USSR’s Soviet Writers Union. It also, over a decade’s time, built Pennsylvania’s Poetry Month into a massive statewide literary initiative that subsequently evolved into National Poetry Month, now administered by the Academy of American Poets.

Bringing Soviet poets and artists to America further fueled Barringer’s passion for the cause of free speech, and in 2005 the American Poetry Center changed its name to American INSIGHT, broadening its scope to include history while moving its work onto the Internet—in particular, social media. “Some people were annoyed that we shifted from poetry to history,” Barringer recalls. “The Greeks had one god for both. Her name was Clio. Greeks took it for granted that poetry and history were both about storytelling.”

Career-wise, Barringer was a late bloomer. In her 20s, she was a mother; she didn’t attend college till her 30s. The fact of returning to school in adulthood, combined with her more recently diagnosed dyslexia, has focused her sharply on the need to embrace technology and communicate effectively with youth. “I have a nerdy gene,” she laughs, though “it took me a while to accept it.

“Every day for the last 15 years, I’ve been living among 20-year-olds to learn their technology,” she says. “I suddenly realized they’re staying the same age as I get older.” She talks about how there’s a “severe generational chasm” between old and young. “It’s not a gap. It’s a chasm. The Internet has changed life on earth ... That’s what happened when the printing press was invented. There were revolutions and total chaos when the people got the power. And that’s what’s happening now, globally.”

She sees the Internet's worldwide network of easy video distribution as the people's communication tool of the future. "The video," she says, "is the new typewriter."

That conviction is why, her poetry background notwithstanding, Barringer has spent the last two years of her life putting together the Free Speech Film Festival.

One important decision she and her board made was that all the submissions should be short-form—from 60 seconds to 60 minutes, no longer. "The long-form documentary is over," Barringer claims. "YouTube clips and sound bites mimic the advertising world that has saturated the minds of millions of people all over the globe since they were very small. Their brains have been imprinted, and there is no going back ... If you can't say it quickly, you can't say it at all."

Though such sentiments suggest the festival is all about reaching a youth audience, Barringer is careful to stress that its aim is to include everyone. It's not only intergenerational, it's nondenominational and, as she frequently points out, nonpartisan. And as soon as word of its launch spread through the film-festival world, she says, the Free Speech Film Festival promptly began receiving submissions from all over. Ultimately, there were 72 entrant films from 17 nations.

"One of [Barringer's] main objectives is to give a microphone, a stage, a spotlight to people who might not have it otherwise," says Jake Paine, an American INSIGHT board member who started as one of Barringer's interns (and now works as editor-in-chief of the hip-hop website HipHopDX.) The festival's judging process, he says—which took place over the course of the winter and considered input from close to 50 film viewers from the ranks of American INSIGHT's supporters—involved looking for a synergy between content and form, although the former was more important than the latter: "It's great for a festival to not get so caught up about craft but [focus first on] content and substance."

That principle is further in evidence with the speakers lined up for the festival's awards ceremony, who lack Hollywood-level name recognition but more than make up for it in substance and relevance to the topic at hand. "Whenever you have to analyze why you believe in free speech, you challenge yourself," says presenter Karen Curry, a former NBC and CNN bureau chief and current Drexel University staff member. Being asked to speak at the festival made her recall a defining moment in her life: As a student activist, she participated in taking over a campus building. When she returned home, her father, a police officer, refused to admonish her actions, even though he did not share her beliefs. Curry learned a profound lesson from that: Sometimes you have to defend speech you don't agree with.

Another presenter, C.K. Williams, a poet and translator who teaches at Princeton University, plans to focus on education. He'll read a poem from his latest work about the Texas textbook scandal, in which the Texas school board has tried to eliminate or downplay the importance of, among other things, evolution, climate change and Thomas Jefferson. "We tend not to think about [a school curriculum] in terms of free speech," Williams says. "But it is a form of speech—perhaps the most crucial form of speech. When you're distorting education, you're distorting minds."

"Everyone has a very different understanding of what constitutes free speech," says Barringer. "Which is beautiful."

She's reluctant to speculate too far about what the festival's future will look like, although she notes she isn't opposed to the possibility that it could become entirely Internet-based. That's because the documentary-film scene—like the broader journalism field in general—is in a state of flux, struggling to adapt to viewing patterns that are increasingly moving online, from the public space to the private. The minimalist structure of the Free Speech Film Festival in its first year reflects an entire medium that isn't sure of its next step, of how it will incorporate the growing number of citizen journalists armed with nothing but smartphones and Internet connections.



This has both its perks and drawbacks. “It’s good to let a lot of voices into the media and to give voice to people to tell their stories,” Curry says. Yet she notes that grassroots storytelling in and of itself isn’t a guarantee of high-quality work, either: “I still believe in journalistic rigor. Before you go and put something up on your blog—or if you work for an organization—you should do the due diligence that you would expect in the journalistic world.”

Barringer seems to find as much value in the process of exploring these topics as in any one specific end result. “There are millions of us out here,” she says, “who are feeling both highly empowered and completely abandoned” by the 21st-century media landscape. “I believe that this is the first time in the history of mankind that generations have grown so far apart so quickly ... and the brains of our children and grandchildren have been imprinted by external corporate technologies from the very start.”

In any case, it seems appropriate for the Free Speech Film Festival to cultivate such discussions in the city that long ago hosted the defining conversations of American liberty. “We’re opening the future of free speech to filmmakers from all over the world, many of whom are very much without it,” Barringer says. “They look to America for guidance on how to handle freedom.”

The Free Speech Film Festival’s screening and awards ceremony will take place at the American Philosophical Society, 427 Chestnut St., on Wed., May 16, at 7 pm. Tickets are \$12/student, \$35/individual, \$85/family, and must be purchased online at americaninsight.org

Freedom Flicks

Six documentaries will be honored as finalists at the Free Speech Film Festival’s awards ceremony. One will be named the festival’s winner and screened in its entirety.

A Balloon for Allah: A look at the oppression of women among the three Abrahamic religions of Cairo, Istanbul and Oslo, Norway.

This is Where We Take Our Stand: Three veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq testify to their experiences.

Free China: The Courage to Believe: The peaceful spiritual movement that swept through China in the 1990s is examined through the experiences of a mother.

I Am Neda: The festival’s shortest film concerns the true story of a woman who fought for freedom amidst tyranny and oppression.

Cointelpro 101: The history of illegal surveillance by the U.S. government from the 1950s through the 1970s.

#whilewewatch: A film about Occupy Wall Street told from the inside.

Find this article at:

<http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/news-and-opinion/cover-story/151601225.html?printView=y>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright © Review Publishing