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TOP STORY

Starting this week, Mystic Film Festival taps into shared love of cinema

By Nancy Burns-Fusaro Sun staff writer
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Audra Doody, Photo Courtesy of THE RIGHT TRACK

The annual Mystic Film Festival Kicks off Oct. 2 at Mystic Luxury Cinemas with an evening full of lighthearted films, and closes Oct. 5 with an awards ceremony and a wine reception.

The festival, now in its eighth year and held in various venues across Westerly, Stonington and Mystic, includes three days full of screenings, filmmaker Q&As, workshops and community events.

A grassroots celebration of independent filmmaking, the festival brings together storytellers, artists, and audiences in their shared love of cinema, according to festival founder and executive director Shareen Anderson.



"We aim to connect people through the power of story and the craft of filmmaking," Anderson said. "The festival creates a space where diverse voices can be heard and meaningful conversations can take root."

Anderson said that this year's event "celebrates global talent" with a slate of 116 short and feature-length documentary and narrative films, including student works.

"Our 'Unproduced Screenplay Competition' has become a highlight of the festival," she said, noting that the competition shines a light on emerging screenwriters and fosters connections within the indie filmmaking community.

With expanded categories for 2025, the competition "continues to champion fresh voices and original storytelling," she added.

Winners will be announced live at the festival, "underscoring our commitment to supporting creators at every stage of the filmmaking process," she said.

In addition, she said, the festival will honor actor Stephen Macht — who played attorney David Keeler on TV's "Cagney & Lacey," Trevor Lansing on "General Hospital," Professor Gerard in "Suits" and has appeared in any number of films — with a "Lifetime Achievement Award."

Macht, who spent part of his childhood in Mystic, is "an Emmy-nominated actor, academic and chaplain," Anderson said, who is being given the award "in recognition of his extraordinary contributions to the art of film and storytelling."

Anderson will moderate "A Conversation with Stephen Macht: A Multifaceted Career in Scholarship, Stage, and Screen," on Saturday, Oct. 4 from 3:30-5:30 p.m. at La Grua Center in Stonington in what she describes "a rare opportunity to hear from the acclaimed actor, scholar, and chaplain whose remarkable career has spanned five decades."

Anderson said local film lovers might particularly enjoy the feature documentary, "BAR," which will include a Q&A with Pawcatuck resident Dale DeGroff, "the man who started the craft cocktail revolution."

"BAR focuses on five people from around the country who descend on the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, along with 70 other students, to participate in the "BAR 5-Day course," the world's premiere educational program on distilled spirits and mixology.

"The BAR 5-Day is for spirits, what the Court of Master Sommeliers is for wine," said Anderson, who is the director of "The Right Track," one of the films to be screened at this year's festival.

"The Right Track" she said, "is a powerful, eye-opening film that takes viewers to the front lines of the fight against sex trafficking and sexual exploitation across North America."

Centered on a process known as "Survivor Model" — a transformative approach that decriminalizes prostituted individuals while holding traffickers, pimps, and sex buyers accountable — the documentary "weaves together emotional testimony from survivors, law enforcement, policymakers, and advocates," Anderson said in a press kit for the film.

"This is not just a film," she said, "it's a call to action."

In the film, Anderson focuses on Janet Jensen, founder of the Jensen Project, and Audra Doody, co-executive director of an organization called "Safe Exit Initiative."



Doody is well known locally for her advocacy work and for seeing to it that survivors receive the "recognition and respect they deserve" she said.

"I'm one of the lucky ones," said Doody in an interview Thursday as she discussed her work in the past, her work today and her role in the film.

"The Right Track" she said, "perfectly tells the story" of the trafficking and anti-trafficking situation in the country today. It's also a tribute to "all the sisters who are gone."

"It came out perfectly," Doody said. "It really sheds a light."

A survivor of sex trafficking in Rhode Island, Doody spoke candidly of the coercion, addiction and abuse that often accompanies women trapped in the sex work trade.

And yes, she believes the names of the sex buyers in the Jeffrey Epstein investigation should be released — in order for the healing of the survivors and so those in power can be held accountable.

"The names need to come out," said Doody, who was honored with the 2023 Worcester Women of Consequence award by the Advisory Committee on the Status of Women and has spoken on panels with prestigious organizations such as the Massachusetts U.S. Attorney's Office, World Without Exploitation Youth Summit, and Bucks Coalition Against Trafficking.

Prior to her eventual recovery, during one of her stays in a domestic abuse shelter, said Doody, who was "trafficked" for more than a decade, she met a survivor who said something she had never heard from another human being.

"She said, 'you are worth so much more,'" Doody recalled. "Nobody ever said that to me before."

And while she was unable to extricate herself immediately — "It's a process," she said — that comment stayed with her.

When she finally "got out" in 2015, she said, she "jumped into advocacy work."

"Her work is not just a profession but a calling," said Anderson, "it's a testament to her resilience, empathy, and unyielding belief in the transformative power of support and understanding."

Anything she can do to "change the system" and prevent other young women from being "bought and sold," she will do, Doody said.

"I love Rhode Island," added Doody. "You guys have the best beaches."

"Narragansett is my happy place," she added.

"The Right Track" will be screened on Friday, Oct. 3 from 4-6 p.m. at Mystic Luxury Cinemas.

Festival events will be held at The United, Mystic Luxury Cinemas, La Grua Center and the Mystic Aquarium Milne Center.

Tickets for Thursday's opening night are \$17 to \$20. A VIP all access pass is available for \$199. For tickets and a complete schedule of films and venues, visit mysticfilmfestival.com.

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