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## From 65th Street to Sundance

By Linda Thomas



Students in the Ballard High School video production program receive exceptional training and honest direction from their instructor, Matt Lawrence. As a result, they have won numerous awards for their creations, and to a professional advisory committee.

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The lights dim in a Ballard High School video production classroom as teacher Matt Lawrence begins his critique of students' work.

"This is an unfortunate shot. It's a jump cut," Lawrence noted. "You really need a reaction shot here. But look at the composition of this next frame. It's excellent."

Students expect to hear honest and sometimes blunt comments from their teacher. They use the words "perfectionist," "demanding" and "professional" to describe him.

Many students also call Mr. Lawrence "inspirational" and they say he's the reason Ballard has a respected video production program. It's a program so acclaimed that Ballard High School was one of only nine schools in the nation invited to attend the recent Sundance Film Festival.

Lawrence - who has a calm, confident manner - does not want individual recognition for the video program's success. He said the credit should go to the Ballard High Foundation, which paid for some of the equipment the school needed,

Even so, Lawrence is the teacher who created the curriculum in 2001 and under his direction students have won nearly 100 awards for their work.

"In the last couple of years we've had finalists for the grand prize at the national high school film festival," Lawrence said. "Students really are making the most of these classes."

The opportunity available at Ballard High School is rare.

While other schools in Seattle have video departments, most of those are vocational programs that teach technical skills. And at some high schools the focus is on media analysis. Lawrence said Ballard's approach is unique because it is a combination of both.

"Just as reading and writing go together, analysis and production are connected," he said.

The instructor knows a lot about both subjects. He earned a master's degree in education and film/television production from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has 19 years of experience working with film and video on commercial and corporate projects. He was also one of the original writers for The Onion, a parody newspaper published weekly in print and on the Internet.

"Having a diverse background in all corners of the industry is what allows me to offer a diverse curriculum," said Lawrence. "That helps students build a portfolio that'll take them in all kinds of possible directions."

Students learn a little of everything from advertising and visual storytelling to news production.

One example of student creativity is a commercial for Ballard-based Marley's Skateboard. It opens with a close up of someone's feet on a skateboard. The boarder swooshes and flips down the street with a pack of other skateboarders following, and then the action screeches to a halt. The next shot reveals it was an elderly woman on the skateboard.

"It's difficult to break a stereotype in just 30 seconds, but it's so effective," Lawrence said.

Many graduates have gone on to study art, film, broadcast journalism and public relations. A few students have even gotten industry jobs right out of high school based on the strength of their portfolios.

Former student Max Bennett is one of Ballard's achievers. He received the largest scholarship possible to the film school at Columbia College of the Arts in Chicago.

Student George Westberg, a BHS senior, has been accepted to New York University's elite film school where he'll start classes in the fall. NYU only accepts about 30 percent of its applicants.

"Once I started video production, I realized how much I loved it," Westberg explained. "I've learned how to be a more critical thinker. It's also taught me how to adapt while working with other students on projects."

Even students who don't intend to pursue a career in the film industry have gained something from the program.

"This class is the reason I come to school each day," said Kinsey Miller, who is a senior in an advanced video production course.

Miller has been the drama department's stage manager for several years, but her focus has shifted from theater arts to culinary arts. She's a baker at the café in Swanson's nursery and plans to open a restaurant in Seattle someday.

She said the video classes taught her "life skills."

"It's important to know how to take criticism," she said. "We sit in class and our work goes up on the screen and everyone tells you what could have been better. Sometimes it's hard to listen to but I've learned not to take it personally."

The one "critic" whose opinion matters most to Miller is her instructor.

"It's tough to get approval from Mr. Lawrence, but when you do it feels so good," she said. "When you can bring him down to your level and you rise up to his level it's really gratifying. And if you can make him laugh that's the best feeling ever."

Last month students had a chance to learn from some of the world's best independent filmmakers during their five-day visit to the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah.

Although the esteemed event doesn't exhibit work by high school students, teen filmmakers from nine schools in the U.S. were invited to observe.

A dozen Ballard students had Sundance credentials to view independent movies, listen to panel discussions and participate in workshops with screenwriters or composers.

It'll be difficult to top that event, but Lawrence is planning a field trip to Hollywood in 2007. Ballard has several graduates working in the Los Angeles area and wants to line up some "behind the scenes" tours so students could see how another part of the industry works.

Lawrence is impressed with BHS students, past and present.

"Their work blows me away," he said enthusiastically. "I'm excited to see students influence each other and learn from each other."

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