

Taking a Closer Look at Independent Film

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By John Hamer

“How many of you like independent movies?” That’s what Scilla Andreen, CEO and co-founder of IndieFlix, asked Rotarians as our main program speaker. Most people in the room raised their hands. “For the last 10 years, independent films have won top awards in the industry,” she said. “Independent films have come a long way and they’re really entertaining.”

IndieFlix, known as “The Netflix of Independent Films,” makes these movies available worldwide and online. It now has 8,000 titles that are viewed in 85 countries. About 60,000 films are made every year around the world, but distribution is a challenge. “It takes a village to release a film,” she said, with a lot of middlemen who take a cut.

Today “indies” can be done more easily and cheaply on “shoestring or micro budgets” of \$100,000 or less -- which is why she started IndieFlix. Andreen was studying political science at NYU when she got interested in filmmaking. “Bit Players” was her first film, and it won several awards.



Now she travels to film festivals all over the world, and is just back from the Sundance Festival in Park City, Utah. A group called “Women of Sundance” is starting to play a major role. Of the 250 top-grossing films, she said, only 9% were directed by women, and only 20% of film critics are female. But that is changing rapidly.

An African-American woman is the first to direct a \$100 million film, and another woman backed the film, “Manchester by the Sea,” an Academy Award nominee. “It’s really depressing,” she said, adding that not all indie films are dark or depressing, as some people seem to believe.

VR (Virtual Reality) is now a growing trend, she said, in which “you are fully immersed in a new world.” In Augmented Reality -- like Pokemon Go -- users are “interactive with the room you’re in.”

In 2012 Andreen started the Indieflix Foundation: Supporting Stories that Can Change the World. It brings indie movies to schools, and has now served about 200,000 students in 500 schools in 20 countries, she said. “We want to change the world within a minute of viewing, and we want to make it free.” Examples of films it has supported:

-- “Finding Kind,” a new movie about bullying. “I was bullied badly as a kid,” she said. “People were mean to me because they were afraid of me because I looked different.”

The film has now had 3,000 screenings in 20 countries. It is shown in schools, and many “Kind Clubs” have been created to combat bullying. IndieFlix provides the film, a discussion moderator’s guide, and Q&A material, all at no cost.

-- "The Empowerment Project," which interviewed 17 successful women, nine of them in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) professions. The film is shown to girls who are then urged to honor a woman in their own community.

-- "ScreenAgers" focuses on how much "screen time" is healthy for young people who are "growing up in the digital age." Released last year, it has had 2,000 screenings in 50 countries.

-- "Angst" is a new movie about mental health, coming in May 2017. It is dedicated to a friend of Andreen's who wanted her to make a movie about mental health – and later committed suicide. It is a documentary film, a series, and an app aimed at encouraging "a conversation about anxiety," Andreen said. One in four teen-agers suffers from anxiety," she said, and it is among the most common psychological problems in the country. The film's target audience: 5th graders and up. "We will take it to schools, churches, temples, and it will be in 4 or 5 languages," she said. People can watch it with students, teachers, parents and neighbors in their communities.

"This is how we have really changed lives," Andreen said. "IndieFlix is a movement. That's who we are."

In the Q&A session:

Laura Rehrman asked: Where are Seattle's assets to help with moviemaking? Wasn't the city's budget for film assistance cut?

Andreen said: "I kind of gave up on it. I'm impatient. I'm not good with red tape." She said we have a great opportunity to do more in the VR and digital space in this area, and should "nurture storytellers and technology here."



Heather Fitzpatrick asked if there were any "upbeat" IndieFlix, and if her daughter's Girl Scout Troop could do a showing of "Finding Kind." Andreen said that "La La Land" and "The King's Speech" were uplifting, along with many others. As for the showing, "We have an underwriter and can offer it for free, for all ages and genders," she said.

Paul Ishii asked about censorship. Andreen replied: "We don't have porn or sex, but it's raw. We don't censor."



Earlier in the program, **President Cathy Gibson** recognized University of Washington students from the Foster School of Business, along with members of the Rotary Business Mentors committee.



Mark Davis read part of a Dale Turner column about the devil selling all of his “tools” except for one: Discouragement, which made all the others possible.

Linda Rough led us in a bluesy version of “America the Beautiful” with **Freeman Fong** on the piano.

President Cathy made an appeal for “Winners for Life” hosts on March 29. “Engage with a junior or senior in one of our public high schools,” she said. She also gave a preview of February programs coming up, and urged members to bring guests.

She gave a brief remembrance to past Rotary member Stan Boreson, citing his “corny Scandinavian jokes and accordion music.” Boreson died in January.

New Members: **Jan Levy** introduced **Vincent Yao**, director general of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office. **Gerry Maurer** introduced **Meisha Rouser**, a consultant with the Nofsinger Group. (See their bios on this website.)

Alan Merry, Assistant District Governor, noted that this year is the centennial celebration of The Rotary Foundation and also the 30th year of Rotary having women members. He recognized new Paul Harris Fellows, who came up to stage to receive their special pins. Then he asked all Paul Harris Fellows to stand and be recognized. Seattle #4 has contributed over \$200 million to TRF, he said: “Your contributions change the world.”

President Cathy said that 47% of our member have made donation to TRF this year, and she appealed to the 53% who have not yet given at least \$100.

