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## **Local film festivals on the rise, contributing to quality of life and generating economic activity in Iowa communities**

*Filmmakers from around the world converge on the state*

**DES MOINES** – The popularity of local film festivals is on the rise and expected to grow in coming years as presenters expand offerings to draw larger audiences, contribute to quality of life and generate a creative economy in communities across Iowa.

“Local film festivals are really taking off and it’s been fun to see how films not only engage the audiences but how Iowa engages the filmmakers,” said Liz Gilman, executive producer of Produce Iowa – State Office of Media Production. “Visiting filmmakers get to see how friendly and hospitable we are here and these festivals really help me put Iowa on their radar in terms of viable locations for filming.”

Two filmmakers who hope to return to Iowa next year are sisters Emilie Barbault-Nizier and Sarah Barbault of Paris, France. They attended the Siouxland Film Festival in Sioux City earlier this year where their film, “A Day of Lucidity,” had its world premiere.

“We met amazing, brilliant people and fell in love with Iowa,” Barbault-Nizier said. “The Siouxland Film Festival has been a tremendous experience for us. You can see lots of films screen there that also screen at so many other prestigious film festivals. They’re excellent programmers and we met the most wonderful fellow filmmakers.”

This year, the Siouxland Film Festival expanded from one to three days and developed different genre categories to reach a variety of audiences. Moving forward with this success, organizers hope to add programs and workshops.

“It would be a great educational experience for our local folks,” added board member Dan Dykstra. “It is an opportunity to enjoy an activity in late February when people are looking to get out of their homes but still do something fun inside.”

When Christy Ebert Vrtis became director of Decorah’s Oneota Film Festival this past June, she was immediately impressed by the enthusiasm and commitment of her board of directors.

“They volunteer and, having gone without a director over the past year, have taken on the responsibility of running the festival,” Vrtis said. “They increased attendance up over 300 from the year before and they raised significantly more money through sponsorships and memberships last year.”

Since its inception, the Oneota has brought together hundreds of film enthusiasts in scenic Northeast Iowa to enjoy award-winning films, converse with filmmakers, and celebrate film as a way to engage the community with social responsibility themes.

“One of the goals of the festival is to bring in films and media that inspire discussion within the community based on the critical issues of our time,” Vrtis said. “With the help of Tiny Circus from Grinnell, we were able to talk about recycling and what do we do with our stuff. Are landfills really the answer? We discussed other topics during the festival, too, such as immigration and immigration reform, how immigration is affecting families here and where immigrants came from. Those kinds of issues are important to discuss.”

The next Oneota event comes August 9 with the screening of “Inspired to Ride,” a film about the first Trans-America bike race, which speaks directly to Decorah’s interest in cycling. Filmmaker Mike Dion will be at the event to discuss the film with attendees.

“We are starting to do more events like this throughout the year,” Vrtis said. “Our long-term plan is to offer something once a month throughout the year and make it work through memberships, sponsorships, grants and the support of our wonderful community and filmmakers.”

## **Economic Impact**

Gilman said that kind of commitment from volunteers and community leaders is crucial for film festivals to succeed. Besides the cultural exchange, film festivals can give back a return on investment. In Dubuque, for example, the Julien Dubuque International Film Festival welcomed more than 4,000 attendees and 125 filmmakers from 11 different states and five countries this past April, generating \$260,930 in economic impact for one weekend.

“Because many of our attendees are from out of town, they are staying in hotels, shopping at local businesses and spending money at restaurants and night clubs,” said Susan Gorrell, executive director of the Julien Dubuque International Film Festival. “That’s significant for our local businesses, and they are supporting us because they see the benefit the festival provides to the community. I couldn’t be more thankful.”

Gorrell said the festival’s success is drawing support not only from statewide sources – including Produce Iowa and the Iowa Arts Council – but is also receiving interest from out-of-state sponsors who are looking to reach a new audience. For example, the Garrett Popcorn Shops of Chicago sponsored a Julien Dubuque International Film Festival After Party event and Gorrell said she is working on several new sponsorship opportunities with corporate interests outside of Iowa. And through the investment of national marketing dollars, Gorrell said she expects more than 1,000 submissions for next year’s festival, which accepts only 35 to 40 features and documentaries and about 35 short films.

“We’ve been able to grow like this because of the support we’ve received by the people of Dubuque, our sponsors and our community leaders,” Gorrell said. “That, in turn, has allowed us to increase the size of cash and prizes we offer to \$40,000 and that is building more economic activity for Dubuque as we continue to grow and draw interest from filmmakers, audiences and sponsors at the national and international level.”

The next weekend film festival in Iowa will be August 6-8 in Burlington with the Snake Alley Festival of Film. A statewide listing of Iowa’s film festivals can be found at [www.produceiowa.com](http://www.produceiowa.com).

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*The Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs and its three divisions – the Iowa Arts Council, Produce Iowa-State Office of Media Production and the State Historical Society of Iowa – empower Iowa to build and sustain culturally vibrant communities by connecting Iowans to the people, places and points of pride that define our state. The department’s work enables Iowa to be recognized as a state that fosters creativity and serves as a catalyst for innovation where the stories of Iowa are preserved and communicated to connect past, present and future generations. [www.culturalaffairs.org](http://www.culturalaffairs.org)*