

Spa City film fest spotlights area, state

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The lights have dimmed, the applause has died down and most of the more than 21,000 attendees of the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival have found their way back home.

The effects of the festival, which ended Oct. 24, are still visible in the city, region and state as the event helps market the creative and cultural tourism available in Arkansas, officials said.

Economic-development and tourism agencies in the region were able to piggyback on all the new faces arriving in town, either by advertising nearby attractions or planning events during the same time frame as the 10-day festival.

The festival also shines a spotlight on moviemaking opportunities in the state by bringing people from the film industry to Arkansas and showing them different terrains, officials said.

The festival, which is poised to celebrate its 20th anniversary next year, has grown from just a few thousand moviegoers in the early 1990s to more than 20,000 people from all over the world. It's the longest running documentary film festival in the country.

Hot Springs Documentary Film Institute Director Malinda Herr-Chambliss said the entire state is benefiting from the exposure.

"Our volunteers go out to eat, park, buy the clothing required for volunteers, they tell their friends about

See **FILM**, Page 6B

Film

• Continued from Page 1B
it. Film festivals are now a category of tourism. People seek them out," she said.

"The arts and cultural tourism bring more than dollars, though. They bring a quality of life and a reputation for being a great place to live, to visit, or to retire. We're seeing people of all ages and backgrounds gaining interest in what we're doing."

The festival draws visitors from New York, California, Chicago, and several international destinations, as well as from Arkansas' neighboring states and inside the state.

The institute started handing out surveys in the past couple of years that include questions related to the economic effect attendees have on the area, in addition to general questions about improving the festival.

The surveys ask questions including how much attendees spent on meals, how many days they stayed in hotels or other lodging and how much money they spent while in Hot Springs.

The answers for this year's survey are still coming in by mail, but over the past few years, Herr-Chambliss said, most people who filled out the questionnaires said they stayed between three and five days.

Some people buy several one-day passes as well, and there are those who fly in from England or other countries and stay for the entire festival.

Even in the down economy, festival attendance is still growing. Herr-Chambliss said last year's attendance was lower than the institute had hoped for, but the numbers were still high. This year's attendance surpassed last year's numbers.

"What we saw is last year there was a little bit of an effect as far as out of country and coast-to coast-travel," she said. "Last year I think people were fearful about the economy. This year, I think they're careful."

The film festival isn't the biggest moneymaker for area hotels, especially those attached to the Hot Springs Convention Center, which hosts larger conventions throughout the year.

Embassy Suites general manager Kurt Schatzel said conventions are the hotel's bread and butter, but the festivals do bring in repeat customers and extra business.

"It's certainly a great high-profile event for Hot Springs. We do see a lift in occupancy when the festival is in town; it's not a huge generator compared to some of the others we have," he said. "Overall I think the festivals work to give the state and Hot Springs a national reputation and add to the tourism industry we have going."

BUILDING A BASE

That tourism industry is largely built on the cultural and artistic offerings of the city and region. Herr-Chambliss said she hopes to see more collaboration between

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cultural nonprofits to help show people both the cultural opportunities and the effects on quality of life the arts can have in Arkansas.

Local galleries have served as volunteer spaces and offered staff for the festival. In turn, moviegoers get to see the larger arts picture in Hot Springs.

Carolyn Taylor owns a gallery, Taylor's Contemporanea Fine Art Gallery, that hosts receptions for the festival. She said arts-related businesses benefit.

"When I first came here, I was like the second gallery and it was a struggle. The galleries are what began the art movement here. We organized and the arts really grew," Taylor said.

"For the last 20 years, it's been a joy to watch the arts movement take off. I cannot tell you the amount of money the arts have brought to Hot Springs and the state of Arkansas in the last two decades."

In addition to being drawn to receptions and other events at Hot Springs' many galleries, visitors also were shown the way to other regional art events like the Round About Artist Studio Tour in Caddo Valley.

"We work very closely with the Hot Springs Visitors and Conventions Bureau. We advertise the film festival here, and in turn they advertised about the artist tour there," said Vicki Egleston, executive director of the Diamond Lakes Regional Visitors Center in Caddo Valley, which opened in September.

"This is the first year we've partnered, but ... it's turned out well. We've definitely seen some new faces."

Egleston said the events weren't planned to coincide, but having the art walk during the first weekend of the festival boosted the walk's attendance, particularly among those from out-of-state.

The cooperation between Arkansas cultural events and nonprofits is something Herr-Chambliss hopes to see more of.

"I see more and more evidence at the state level, that this creative economy, even in a slow economy, is strong," she said.

"What they're seeing is the state working together to promote its creative economy and the arts offerings. There are plenty of examples of nonprofits and arts groups working together to provide the best events and offerings they can. The more that happens, the better it will be for the state and for the creative economy."

BRANCHING OUT

Herr-Chambliss said the film institute also is working on capitalizing on the conventions and on the institute's fan base and extensive archive — the largest single documentary film archive in the world. In a few weeks the institute will open its doors to a convention on hospice care, showing several films from its archive on end-of-life issues.

The institute has increased its offerings to include a children's documentary festival, a classics series that brings classic movie stars to town for showings of their movies, and other events.

"A huge amount of work goes into the festival, but we do events and workshops throughout the year," Herr-Chambliss said.

"We even go to schools and to children when they can't get to us. A major part of our mission statement is education and we want to make ourselves and our offerings available to people of all different backgrounds and interests."

The nonprofit also is branching out to team up with universities on workshops for up-and-coming artists and with kindergarten-through-12th-grade schools to expose children to documentary films and the possibility of careers in filmmaking.

The efforts are a major contribution to building the film industry in Arkansas, said Christopher Crane, director of the Arkansas Film Commission.

"The industry wouldn't exist without these festivals. It's the backbone of the industry," he said. "We're starting to really have the work force to build the industry."

"We have the incentives in place, and with the programs and workshops being offered by the [institute] and the programs at the universities to build the work force, we're building a platform for the industry. The last component we're working on is building the infrastructure like sound stages."

The Hot Springs documentary festival, along with the handful of other movie festivals throughout the state, helps Crane pitch Arkansas as a place for filmmakers to shoot, produce and edit their films.

Chase was tight-lipped about names because the deal is still in the early stages, but said a director who came for the Hot Springs festival is touring the state with interest in shooting a feature film.

Herr-Chambliss said the institute also is working on a grant to add editing bays and an editing suite to the institute's offices in order to attract more filmmakers.

"The documentary format has never been so much relevant. It's my personal thought that it's the global language of the next century," she said.

"Arkansas has a lot to offer. There's a diversity of looks, and more and more people are coming here to incubate, process, expose or complete their films. The festival helps expose them to all this place has to offer and to the warmth of the residents."