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H.S. filmmakers coming at you with the ‘Real Deal’

By Matt Zeidel

Forget Hollywood. The freshest movie releases — one of them filmed right here in Brooklyn — are premiering in Chelsea.

And in this case, “fresh” means as close to the streets as it gets. “The Choices We Make,” a 15-minute short film about a teen and her boyfriend’s struggle with her pregnancy, was written by a 17-year-old East Flatbush girl and shot over a wintry weekend in Sea Gate, a gated community out at the tip of Coney Island.



And, cut! Tiara Bennett, the 17-year-old director of “The Choices We Make,” takes time off of a busy shooting weekend in Sea Gate this past winter. It will premier June 12

“The Choices We Make,” along with three other shorts written by high school students from across the country, will air June 12 at the 2007 Real Deal Film Premier at Chelsea West Cinemas, 333 West 23 St. in Manhattan.

The students entered the Real Deal screenplay contest, sponsored by Scenarios USA, a nonprofit that “uses writing and filmmaking to foster youth leadership, advocacy and self-expression in under-served teens.” Thousands of teens enter their original screenplays every year, and Scenarios USA pairs the winners with professional directors.

The movies become a kind of hip sex ed, made by teens for teens covering topics like pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections. According to Scenarios USA, which was founded by Kristen Joiner and Maura Minsky nine years ago, some 15 million people a year watch the films, at film festivals, on television and in high schools nationwide.

The directors, who work for free, collaborate with the teens in preparing the screenplays for intense two-day shoots. For “The Choices We Make,” New Zealand-born director Alison MacLean (“Sex and the City,” “Jesus’ Son”) spent months working with Tiara Bennett, who was a senior at Clara Barton High School when she entered and who just completed her first year at Georgia Southern University as a biology major.

Bennett was given the screenplay assignment in a Clara Barton health class but said she only got around to writing the winning entry later that week — in the two hours before it was due.

“I wanted to write something me and my friends could relate to,” she told 24/7 at the time of the shoot. “I’ve had friends who have gotten pregnant, but it’s not based on them . . . I wanted it to be a reversal of the normal, where the female is unsure and the male wants her to go through with it — instead of saying, ‘You should get an abortion.’”

“Seeing my story come to life with Alison [Maclean] and a professional film crew was an amazing experience,” Bennett said. “I’m excited to have this story contribute to the conversation on pregnancy and fatherhood in my community.”

Hers wasn’t the only community that was affected by the film. Beachside Sea Gate is normally extra quiet during winter months, but the Atlantic Avenue house where most of the filming took place was a motion picture of controlled chaos, bustling with actors, cameramen, grips, interns and the rest of a miniature film crew running around.

Six months and a smooth postproduction later, the film is ready to debut along with two others answering the question, “What’s the real deal with romance and relationships?” and one, with the cooperation of Black Entertainment Television, which grapples with the issue of growing up in the age of AIDS.

“Ask [those questions] of young people from three different parts of the country and you get three different answers,” co-founder Joiner said.

“The thing that’s really interesting about these films is that they represent a new voice in the media, and what these young people have to say about their lives and their perspectives,” she said. When determining “how young people should be educated, what kind of sex education kids should get, it’s really important to go back to the source and ask them. And these films represent those voices,” she added.

Meanwhile, Bennett, the young screenwriter cum physical-therapy student, is living her life, waiting for the premier to come.

“I don’t think the real excitement is going to come until the night it goes down,” Bennett said.

“I’m not really doing anything right now . . . but soon enough, I’m going to be practicing my speech.”

“The Choices We Make” opens June 12 at Chelsea West Cinemas, 333 West 23 St. Doors open at 6 p.m. with a VIP reception to follow. Tickets start at \$75 for one unreserved ticket to the screening and a Q&A with the writers and directors. All proceeds go to Scenarios USA, a nonprofit. Sponsors include Mad House Editorial Studios, Access Industries, Inc., Kodak, Tom Fontana, Doug Liman, IFC, Interference, Inc. and Crew Cuts Postproduction. For more information, call 718-230-5125.