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Mission teens' script to become film

March 13, 2004

Kathryn Walson The Monitor

MISSION — An optional English assignment has turned into a rare filmmaking opportunity for five Mission High School seniors.

The group wrote a script that was one of three in the country to win the Scenarios USA script-writing contest. Scenarios is a 5-year-old non-profit organization that strives to help teenagers make healthy decisions. Each year, it links winning teenage scriptwriters with successful directors, who turn their scripts into Hollywood-quality movies.

Scenarios matched the Mission winners with New York-based director Ben Younger, who is best known for writing and directing 2000's Boiler Room starring Vin Diesel. Younger, 31, visited Mission High School on Friday on his first trip to the Rio Grande Valley. He addressed a classroom full of students and met with the winning writers to develop their script. He'll meet with them over the weekend to further hone the material.

"I'm looking forward to working with the kids. ... I want to give (them) a professional experience."

The group consists of Laura Coria, Amanda Ramirez, Juan Carlos Ramirez, Gladys Sanchez and Krystal Villarreal. Their college-prep English teacher, Martha Castañeda, gave the class the option of writing a script. The students teamed up and decided to address teen pregnancy, an issue facing some of their schoolmates, they said. They took six weeks to research, brainstorm and write Someone's Sorrow, an 11-page script about a high school girl who faces choices regarding relationships, sex and pregnancy. The protagonist gets pregnant, and after her boyfriend leaves her, she decides to abort the baby, they

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said. The script's purpose is to show the consequences of decisions, Ramirez said.

"It's realistic, and it happens," she said.

Castañeda, who entered all her students' scripts into the contest, said she had a good feeling about Someone's Sorrow. Scenarios USA holds contests for students in the Rio Grande Valley, Miami and New York. The Mission script was the only one chosen from the 226 scripts submitted by students between Laredo and Brownsville, said Maura Minsky, Scenarios USA's co-founder. Three previous winners came from the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo and Laredo school districts, she said.

Younger, who is doing the project for free, said he was impressed with the drama's realistic dialogue and treatment of universal teenage concerns.

"They have their finger on the pulse of what most kids are feeling," he said.

Younger said he'll approach this film just like he'll approach Prime, a movie he'll direct that stars Meryl Streep and Sandra Bullock. For both projects, he'll hire professionals to direct costumes, makeup and lighting. Instead of New York, he'll film the students' movie in the Rio Grande Valley, and he'll cast it with Valley actors.

Younger and his crew will spend about two weeks in the Valley in May. They'll film the movie in two days with the help of local students. Minsky asked restaurants willing to donate food for the crew to call toll-free 866-414-1044.

Younger said he'll run all script changes past the writers — even while the film undergoes editing in New York.

The winning students will travel to New York in December for the movie's release and to meet fellow winners and receive media coaching, Minsky said.

The 10-minute film should reach 7 million people through television, the Internet, film festivals, conferences, schools, community groups and teen programs, Minsky said. Scenarios films have been seen nationally on Showtime, MTV, NBC, Oxygen, PBS and ABC's World News Tonight.

Participation in the filmmaking often leads to scholarships and internships, and it enhances college applications, Minsky said.

For more information, visit www.scenariosusa.org.

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