

Human Rights and Disability Film Festival

■ Myriam Sfeir

On December 3rd, 2004 the Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union, (LPHU), in collaboration with various national and foreign associations held its Second Human Rights and Disability Film Festival. The three-day event took place at Estral Theater in Hamra and coincided with the International Day of Disabled Persons. The idea of the festival came about in 2003. The aim was to raise awareness about disability issues and to create a forum to highlight many of the issues facing disabled people.

For its first disability film festival, LPHU collaborated with Amnesty International, Save the Children Sweden and some local and private partners. The two-day festival held at Saint Joseph University was more or less an awareness raising initiative. The idea was to get the public interested in disability issues and get the local media involved in disability and human rights. Most of the films screened in the first festival were foreign – from the United Kingdom and France.

The second film festival, like the previous one, served as a platform to highlight some of the issues facing people with disabilities. Moreover, it strived to emphasize the fact that many of the problems the disabled face are a result of the prejudice and discrimination they encounter rather than disability itself. However, it differed from the first in that college students produced most of the films and documentaries. The British Embassy, Save the Children Sweden, Norwegian People's Aid, as well as Amnesty International sponsored the festival.



The opening ceremony witnessed the launch of the short film *Sawtuna*, or *Our Voice*, prepared and produced by LPHU, the Inclusion Network* and volunteers. The second and third day of the festival involved film screenings where seven documentaries and films were shown. Moreover, fun games with Lebanese entertainer Tony Baroud were organized to educate children about different disabilities. The last day hosted an award ceremony for best film on human rights, best film on the rights of disabled persons, and best film script.

Lara Shamji, a freelance media designer explained more about the making of the documentary *Our Voice*, and recounted: "Given that I am a freelancer who works on designing visual communication projects for marginalized groups, I contacted LPHU and we worked together on developing a project for the youth because they are the most marginalized in society. We designed the project in collaboration with the Inclusion Network. Shamji continued: "As a freelancer, I try to work with and develop projects for grassroots organizations because I think they are the most well-informed when it comes to disability issues. None of the organizations under the umbrella of the Inclusion Network are institutions, they are mostly parent-led or run by persons with disabilities and I believe they are the most knowledgeable when talking about disability."

Shamji explained that the project entailed training a target group of 25 young participants, with and without addition-

al needs, on how to use digital media as a platform for voice, empowerment, and capacity building within an inclusive environment. The end result was the documentary *Our Voice*. Shamji stated: "A video project was specifically tailored to encourage the participants to see that they have the skills and the power to tell their own story and be heard. The participants were able to overcome misrepresentation of their cause by showing that they are active players in their own lives and defy stereotypes of passivity in the media."

According to Shamji, the documentary was able to highlight how a group of young people was able to use visual media positively as a form of self-expression. She affirmed: "Given that visual media is the most effective communication tool when it comes to the masses, we felt that it could raise awareness and bring about a positive change. And we succeeded because the participants were able, via the media, to demonstrate their capacities and relay their

thoughts to a wide audience. Bearing in mind that the subjects in the images are often misrepresented in the media, through the documentary *Our Voice* they were able to show their side of the story."

END NOTES

The Inclusion Network is an informal collective that aims at achieving inclusion within the family, the educational system and society. The Network came about four years ago and groups the various associations representing disabled persons, their parents and specialists with college professors. Among the members of the Inclusion Network are: Association of Parents of Deaf Children in Lebanon, Dyslexia Association, Lebanese Autism Society, Lebanese Down Syndrome Association, Lebanese Physically Handicapped Union, Youth Association of the Blind, as well as partners from the ECD Core Group, Lebanese American University, Lebanese University, Palestinian Disability Forum, Save the Children-Sweden, Saint Joseph University, and UNRWA.

Short Films and Documentaries Screened

- *Talk*

(Dir. Matthew Parkhill, UK 2000, 10 mins)

A young executive wakes to find himself in a world where disability is the norm. As a non-disabled person he has both physical and social barriers to overcome. This film was made by The Disability Rights Commission.

- *Street Play*

(Dir. Samar Kanafani with CHAMS and Beirut DC, Lebanon, 2002, 11 mins)

Street Play is a portrait of children creating space for themselves in a city where there is none and inventing their own playground in the street.

- *L'homme de compagnie (The Playmate)*

(Dir. Philippe Thomas, France 1996, 7 mins)

A romantic encounter in the street set to the rhythms of samba music.

- *Harvie Krumpet*

(Dir. Adam Elliot / AUS 2003 / 20mins)

It is the biography of an ordinary man seemingly cursed with perpetual bad luck.

- *Elie Fayrouz*

(Dir. Cynthia Choucair, Lebanon / UAE, 2003, 13 mins)

Elie Darwish has a voice similar to that of famous Lebanese singer Fairuz. The film traces a story of this man with a woman's voice and his life, which is full of love, music, pain, solitude and waiting.

- *Blind Sensations*

(Dir. Raina Haig / UK 2001 / 9 mins)

A three-part expressionist film exploring how blind people secure and maintain a sense of personal space.

- *An Independent Life - Disability in Kosovo*

(Dir. Andrea Ruffini, Italy 2004, 26 mins)

Disability in Kosovo today: difficulties, prejudices, inter-ethnic problems, social organization. Kosovo is still under the control of UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo), but

many social problems are still there, racism is still alive, and many social questions are still unsolved. The Italian N.G.O. C.i.Ca., with the activity of the "Centre for an independent life", try to help people with disabilities in Peje - PEC to find an autonomy and an identity.

- *Handicap*

(Dir. Lewis-Martin Soucy, France 2004, 8 mins)

A tale of seduction where it's not what you say, but how you say it.

- *An Artist's Guide to Schizophrenia documentary*

(Dirs: David Emerson and Damian Clarke, UK 2002, 29 mins)
Aidan Shingler explores the creative and spiritual dimensions of schizophrenia.

- *Untitled part 3b: (as if) beauty never ends...*

(Jayce Salloum, Lebanon/Canada/ 2002/ 11:22 mins)

Part of a work in progress, which features, Abdel Majid, a 1948 refugee in Lebanon, discusses issues of dispossession through an eloquent poem told by the ruins of his house in Palestine where once he was allowed to visit after his first 30 years of being displaced. Ambient sound and images including orchids blooming superimposed over raw footage from post massacre filmings of the 1982 massacre at Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

- *Miracle*

(Dir. George Homsy/ IESAV USJ/ Lebanon / 2004/ 25 mins)

An ironic, fly-on-the-wall experience of obtaining an American visa when Lebanese had to go to Cyprus or Syria. The story is told through an eclectic mix of local characters that we can all identify with, set in the sterile surroundings of a consulate. How far would you go to get a visa?

- *Happy Day*

Adelislam / Morocco / 2003, 17 mins

The Story of Said, 7, who through his work experiences all sorts of maltreatment. *Happy Day* sees Said change from victim to victor.