

# Saving a film festival

By Rex Nelson

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The story found its way into the media in February of last year, and it wasn't good. It appeared as if the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival, which had drawn people from across the country to downtown Hot Springs each October for the previous two decades, might become a thing of the past. The Hot Springs Documentary Film Institute owed more than \$300,000. There was debt of at least \$185,000 on the Malco Theatre on Central Avenue and a \$150,000 note on an adjacent parking lot. Foreclosure proceedings had begun.

James Langley, an official with the institute, described the situation in an interview with a Little Rock television station as "kind of like being thrown in the deep end and being told to swim. It's definitely a sink-or-swim situation."

Carol Kimery, the executive director of the film institute at the time, said: "We have to respond to the situation within the next 30 days. We actually are really working hard to come up with the funds to take care of our payments. Time has basically run out."

With the clock ticking, a core group of film enthusiasts went to work. By May 2012, the news was better. Susan Altrui of Little Rock, the chairman of the institute's board, had put together a new group of board members, instituted plans to sell the Malco and convinced officials at Arvest Bank that the proper financial controls were in place. The foreclosure suit was withdrawn.

In October 2012, the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival was in a new location just north on Central Avenue, the venerable Arlington Hotel. It turned out to be the proper fit. Of course, the Arlington long has served as the site of many of this state's most important gatherings.

Another good fit has been Courtney Pledger, who signed on last year to direct the festival. Pledger, who was born in Little Rock but grew up in Jackson, Miss., produced her first television program more than three decades ago and spent much of her successful career in Los Angeles and London before moving back to Little Rock to direct the Arkansas Motion Picture Institute. AMPI has a hand in ensuring the success of not only the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival but also the Little Rock Film Festival and the Ozark Foothills Film-Fest at Batesville.

Pledger says her initial mission was simply to "win people's confidence back." She has succeeded in that mission and is now working to take the festival to the next level. Opening night last Friday for

the 22nd annual event saw almost 500 people buy tickets for a showing of Ryan White's Good Ol' Freda, a film about Beatles secretary Freda Kelly. First-night attendance was up significantly from last year. A series of sports-related documentaries has increased the appeal of the 10-day festival. This Saturday night, for instance, the festival will feature a showing of Jose Canseco: The Truth Hurts with filmmaker Bill McAdams Jr. and Canseco, the controversial former baseball star, in attendance.

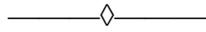
On Friday, two Arkansas-related sports documentaries will be screened: The Big Shootout, an account of the epic December 1969 college football game at Fayetteville between the University of Arkansas and the University of Texas, and The Identity Theft of Mitch Mustain, the story of the highly recruited quarterback out of Springdale High School who spent one controversy-filled season playing for the Razorbacks before transferring to the University of Southern California.

The Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival began in the fall of 1992, the same year former Hot Springs resident Bill Clinton was elected president. The national media spotlight was on Hot Springs due to the Clinton connection, and actor James Whitmore was among those who showed up for the first festival. Ten documentary films that had been nominated for Academy Awards were shown. By 1993, there were 44 films screened. Actor James Earl Jones headlined a fundraising event and declared that the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival would become "one of the genre's most important venues." In 1994, more than 5,000 people attended the festival, and 14 filmmakers showed up to discuss their documentaries.

Flush with early success, the Hot Springs Documentary Film Institute purchased the Malco in 1996. At the time, it was seen as a place that would provide a home for activities throughout the year. In the end, the debt burden almost brought the institute down. Now, things seem to be working out in downtown Hot Springs. The film festival found a home at the Arlington, and the Malco found a new owner in Rick Williams, the real estate developer who successfully transformed the financially strapped Lake Hamilton Resort into a senior living center known as The Atrium at Serenity Pointe.

"The building is an amazing, solid, well-built structure, a lot like The Atrium," Williams told the Sentinel-Record of Hot Springs. "It has good bones. It needs to be brought up to the right fire and city codes and needs to be updated in the right way, maintaining the old craftsmanship."

Williams has purchased several other buildings in downtown Hot Springs, telling the newspaper that he didn't have a "definite plan for the buildings I purchased other than they will be at a standard the city will be more than proud of. Hot Springs means a lot to me, and I do believe that I and others can make a difference."



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