

Navajo filmmaker receives \$3K for new film

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
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‘The Mayors of Shiprock’ shot on Navajo Nation

Ramona Emerson of Tohatchi is the latest recipient of a grant from the New Mexico Film Foundation, officials announced this week.

The Navajo-born Emerson, who owns film production company Reel Indian Pictures, was awarded \$3,600 from the NMFF toward the making of a new film documentary called *The Mayors of Shiprock*.

The grant is a result of a partnership between the NMFF and the Albuquerque-based Isora Foundation.

“The [Isora Foundation’s] mission is to fund projects which empower individuals to improve conditions within their own communities,” Isora Foundation Director Wendy Wells said. “During our 2016 funding cycle, we reached out to the [NMFF] to see if they knew of film projects that would meet our mission goals. Dirk Norris, the director at the New Mexico Film Foundation, suggested we look into Emerson’s project.”

The Mayors of Shiprock is 54-minutes-long and follows the storyline of the Northern Diné Youth Committee as they work to build and better their community. The group’s leader, Graham

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Beyale, has taken the lead in creating and implementing a community-oriented base of young men and women who strive to create a better world for themselves and their families. After a three-year hiatus from college, Beyale realizes he must return to school to implement the change he wants for his community and his tribe.

Why Shiprock?

Emerson, who previously had a film at the annual Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, said she selected the Shiprock community after a lot of thought. Emerson was raised in Tohatchi and Santa Fe.

“The young people of Shiprock are extraordinary,” the filmmaker said. “They commit every week to work in their community. Their efforts have had a direct effect on the community of Shiprock. They have motivated a lot of people – they have created a real park in the community for youth. They hold events like dodgeball and volleyball tournaments. They haul wood for the elderly; they pick up trash and, generally, mobilize the community to help. They remove graffiti and they actively try to learn about their language and culture. In short, they care.”

Wells explained what it means to help out filmmakers like Emerson.

“By providing a funding award, we are not only able to support a local New Mexico filmmaker, but support her efforts to highlight the incredible work Navajo youth are doing to bring about change within their own communities,” Wells said. “This film is a story of empowerment. We felt that its message could bring hope and inspire youth everywhere.”

Norris noted that this is the second grant the NMFF has awarded Emerson in 2016. Emerson, who graduated from the University of New Mexico, was one of 17 submissions for a Beau McNicholas Post Production grant.

Emerson said she hopes to inspire youth in every tribal community to take note of what the Northern Diné Youth Committee is doing and make an effort to do the same. She said the film should come out at some point next year, and she didn’t rule out Gallup as a showing venue.

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Norris said the Santa Fe-based NMFF helps grow the independent film industry in New Mexico, while offering financial support and educational opportunities to New Mexico independent filmmakers.

In 2010, Emerson was a Native Filmmakers Ford Foundation Fellow at the Sundance Film Festival. Two years later, her short film *Opal* — about a young Navajo girl who takes on the town bully — made its way through Sundance film circles. The film was shown at Gallup's El Morro Theatre and drew a wide audience.

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