

Local filmmaker overcomes obstacles to realize a dream

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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Growing up on the Navajo Reservation, Stanley Bain was afraid to dream. The future looked less than hopeful: graduate from Holbrook High School in Arizona, then get a dead-end job there or in some other bordertown. Grander opportunities seemed out of reach.

“I didn’t think I was afforded or had the right to dream,” Bain recalled. “I could maybe find a job in town. I didn’t think I was allowed to dream and do what I wanted to do. I felt alone.”

A lot has changed. Today Bain is realizing his dream of being a filmmaker, working the festival

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circuit with his short film “Together” and pursuing new projects.

“Together” screened at the Santa Fe Film Festival over the weekend, and is part of the festival’s online showcase. The short film is a window into the relationship of alcoholic ex-boyfriends Kelly and Mason as they confront substance abuse and destructive patterns. For Bain, those issues are drawn from real life observations.

“Kelly and Mason are representations of people from my life and my family’s life. The idea was to explore a relationship and why we stay in them if they are so bad,” he said. “We’ve all seen relationships where the people are not good for each other. It’s easy to say that they are in love, but what is the thing that binds us together?”

The film is deliberately shot in black and white, giving it a bleak cast that tells part of the story. “Being in love is more equated with happiness and color,” Bain said. “These two characters have been involved for a long time. Their life has become absent of color with the drugs and the drinking and partying that they are doing that has destroyed their lives. One is trying to rebuild his life, but there is no joy or happiness in their lives.”

While the film is black and white, the subject, not so much. “Together” purposely ends without resolution – much like life.

“I didn’t want it to end with a happy bow on it to make you feel comfortable. There’s Cinderella and the prince, but what happens the next day?” Bain said. “At one point it was suggested to me to write a happier ending, and I actually wrote a happier-ish ending, but it didn’t feel like that’s where, emotionally, it should have ended. I cut that off and went back to ending in chaos. I think it’s more impactful that way.”

The story could happen to anyone, but Bain wanted gay characters to tell it. “I’m a queer filmmaker. I want to see characters on screen that are like me,” he said. “Some people talk about love from the perspective of a man and a woman. From my perspective, I see two guys.”

Pulling all the elements together to make the film was no small feat, especially during the

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COVID-19 pandemic. Bain, who wrote, directed and co-produced the movie, was finishing at Colorado Film School and working as a grocery cashier when he shot it.

Filming took place in Denver over four weekends in October, which meant some cold nights behind the camera, including a couple huddling under a blanket to watch a monitor during snow flurries.

After filming he moved to Albuquerque to embed himself in the burgeoning film scene. There, a friend told him about the Sen. John Pinto Native Filmmakers Memorial Fund, and he was able to secure grant funding for post-production. Many of the post-production tasks had to be done remotely because of the pandemic.

“It became really trusting your collaborators,” Bain said, offering the example of the soundtrack. “My composer Julius, it was giving him a huge part of the film and you really have to trust his judgment.”

Overall, Bain is grateful for the experience and the lessons he learned helming not only the filmmaking, but the funding and promotion as well.

“I feel like a stronger filmmaker for wearing all these hats – applying for grant funding, doing the social media campaign, the crowdfunding campaign, all those things. I’ve learned a lot from it. Now they don’t seem like scary terms or scary ideas any more. It’s, ‘OK, here’s what we have to do,’” Bain said.

Nobody would call “Together” a lighthearted film, and the tragedy hit home when one of Bain’s friends died by suicide during pre-production. The film is dedicated to him.

Finishing the film was a major accomplishment for Bain, who said Christmas with his family in 2021 was sweeter both because the pandemic prevented gatherings in 2020 and because he was returning victorious from his quest.

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“Most of my family lives in Phoenix now,” he said. “We weren’t able to get together the year before so we got together for Christmas. The family had seen the film on the big screen. I’ve been fighting for this for so long. Them actually seeing the result, and the result is actually really good, it made hanging out on Christmas more meaningful.”

With the film finished and in limited streaming release, Bain is setting his sights on the future. He’s working on a story for a horror film about body image, and he has another idea for a TV pilot that draws on his days at Holbrook High School.

Meanwhile, he’s promoting “Together” – it has screened at the Phoenix Film Festival, the American Indian Film Festival, the LA Skins Film Fest and was a Festival Favorite at Cinema Diverse: The Palm Springs LGBTQ Film Festival – to get exposure for himself and short films in general.

“My hope is that people go out and give short films a chance,” he said. “There’s a lot of short films out there. Don’t discount short films, go out there and support them. Go see mine. Support indie filmmaking, queer filmmakers, indigenous filmmakers. We need support, even if it’s just emotional, [hearing] ‘I really liked your film and would like to see more from you.’”

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