

STAR students win notice in Venice

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At STAR School, a group of creative youngsters are

showcasing their talents and voices on a worldwide cinematic stage.

"I like to put a lot of heart into my films," said freshman Kira Butler, 14, whose film work at STAR School has already taken her across the U.S. and to Italy. "Through filmmaking I understand who I am in the world community."

Located 15 miles northwest of Leupp, STAR School serves mostly Navajo students from preschool to 8th grade.

Nestled among rolling hills with vistas of the San Francisco Peaks, the rural school is the first off-the-grid campus in the country powered by wind and solar energy.

Now STAR School is gaining another reputation for its 3-year-old media arts program that connects Native American youth with their culture, community and themselves.

"When it comes to mainstream media, indigenous youth are often seen in the negative or are portrayed as historical or cultural subjects in the past," said Rachel Tso, the media arts educator who developed the film curriculum. "It's important for students to represent themselves using their own voice, not someone else's."

Students from fifth to eighth grade can learn the nuts and bolts of film making: script writing, researching topics, interview techniques, capturing video and sound, editing, acting and public speaking.

The main focus is on what Tso terms "place-based media arts."

"It describes what we're doing with our students through film," she said. "It reconnects kids with their community, reconnects their place in the community and reconnects them with their family, including their elders."

After wrapping an on-camera interview, Nole Yazzie, 13, an 8th-grader, wants to remind people of tribal history. His student group is working on a documentary about the Navajo's Long Walk with interviews of local elders.

"My hope is it brings back those stories. It's been over 100 years, it's important to talk about and not forget," he said.

Films subjects have ranged from heritage foods, sustainable living, traditional Navajo peacemaking and making artificial snow from reclaimed wastewater for a ski area on the San Francisco Peaks.



They also use different storytelling techniques including

lightbox animation for the film "Red Bird Saves the Corn," a traditional Spider Woman story. The school's Web site has a complete listing of student films.

Students have won first-place awards at the Arizona Student Film Festival and have screened their work at festivals in Austin, Texas, Seattle, Phoenix and Flagstaff. STAR School films are scheduled to be shown Oct. 12-16 during the Flagstaff Mountain Film Festival.

STAR School founders Kate and Mark Sorenson said the film classes are an excellent example of "place-based learning."

"Our program's philosophy is to get kids connected with the place where they live, to have a voice of where they are in that place," said Mark Sorenson, director of the school.

With a long educational career of working with Navajo students, the Sorensons opened the charter school in 2001 with a mission to incorporate a curriculum for place-based learning.

The educators chose the name STAR, an acronym for "Service To All Relations." It is part of the school's philosophy, which follows the Navajo teachings of k'e.

Sustainable and green practices are taught through classes about how to build a greenhouse and raise a garden. Both topics are among many featured as short documentaries.

"The films allow students to use their voice to get people to listen," said Mark Sorenson. "If students were writing a term paper, only their teacher would read it. With films, you might have hundreds or thousands of people see and learn about their Dine culture, and we're thrilled about that in a big way."

STAR School was featured in the documentary, "Valdagno, Arizona," directed and produced by the Pyoor Collective, a group of international writers and filmmakers, which was recently screened at the world-renowned Venice Film Festival.

The film follows Umberto Marzotto, an Italian songwriter who travels to the Navajo Nation to find a better understanding of himself. The film features interviews with Leupp residents, the metal band Blackfire, and former Miss Navajo Nation Radmilla Cody.

The film crew visited the school this summer where they met Butler, who was working as a student film camp mentor.

Impressed with the young, film savvy students, the crew did interviews about the school and its media program and its mission to bring cultural and place-based learning to students. They included clips of the students' films in the documentary.

Because of her film work, Butler was chosen to attend the Venice Film Festival for the film's premiere.

"The experience was amazing," said Butler, whose weeklong stay in Italy included a whirlwind of press interviews, festival screenings and sightseeing.

"This has definitely made me want to pursue a career in film," she said.

She has one other hope.

"It's important to inspire each other to do their best," she said. "I would like my films to inspire others and to be a resource for all my relations. It feels good to be an example for Native youth, to help kids and to show them anyone from a small rez town can do whatever they want."

To learn more or to watch STAR student films, check out www.starschool.org and click on the multimedia link.

PICTURES: TOP: Kira Butler, from the STAR School in Leupp, Ariz., is interviewed by an Italian journalist at the Venice Film Fest.

BOTTOM: Kira Butler, from the STAR School in Leupp, Ariz., filming in Venice, Italy, with a Flip camera she won at the Arizona Student Film Festival.