



FOCUS ON FILM



St. Edward High School is home to Northeast Ohio's only dedicated high school film department. In its three years, the rapidly expanding program has fostered a collaborative atmosphere, a high level of professionalism, and the resources for success among its students.

Walking through the halls of St. Edward High School, it is hard to miss the film department's impact on campus—in fact, just by walking through those halls, you are most likely an extra in a couple of student films. Teams of budding filmmakers are scattered throughout the building, shooting and re-shooting scenes for their latest project. Students trade stories from on-set experiences, such as rising seniors Connor Ling and Eric Reising's recent work on a Mr. Hero commercial that featured the Cleveland Cavaliers. The monthly SETV video announcements play in homeroom, showcasing students' screenwriting, directing, camera operating, editing, and sound mixing skills. Filmmaking opportunities abound and our Edsmen are eager to build their skills and experience.

"I fell in love with film during my first year of film at St. Ed's," Alec Battistoni '15 said. "I got involved at the beginning of my junior year and it significantly changed my path, I believe, for the better."

Battistoni graduated in May and is headed to New York University to study film. NYU is considered one of the top three schools for film production and film studies in the United States. A creative and hardworking student, Battistoni previously considered pursuing engineering or architecture, believing that art was not a legitimate career choice.

In his film courses, however, he experienced a great sense of accomplishment and pride in the work of filmmaking and found a supportive and positively challenging community. In addition to storytelling and technical skills, he said the classes taught leadership, cooperation, and self-value.

"Eventually I realized," Battistoni said, "that I could not see myself doing anything with my life that wouldn't let me be creative and really express myself, like film."

Art is one of the core required subject areas for International Baccalaureate World Schools. Schools may choose to fulfill this requirement with courses in dance, music, theatre, visual arts, or film. In preparation for the school's 2012 IB certification, St. Edward High School administrators decided to build a film department.

According to the International Baccalaureate, the art of filmmaking calls for courage, passion, and curiosity: "Courage to create individually and as part of a team, to explore ideas through action and harness the imagination, and to experiment; passion to communicate and to act communally, and to research and formulate ideas eloquently; curiosity about self and others and the world, about different traditions, techniques and knowledge, about the past and the future, and about the limitless possibilities of human expression through the art form."

Undeterred by the fact that only a small percentage of IB schools offer film, teachers Matt Stepnowsky and Nick Kuhar jumped at the chance to take on the program. Though new to the art of filmmaking, the two former English teachers saw significant overlap between the areas of study. "There are jargon differences but, at the end of the day, you're telling stories." Stepnowsky said, "It's people telling stories with certain themes; it's people sharing the human experience." The teachers were trained in IB and began to establish the curriculum.

After surveying other programs at Northeast Ohio high schools, Kuhar and Stepnowsky found that only seven schools offered any film production classes, and none had a dedicated film department. Film is also a minority within the IB community, with less than 10% of International Baccalaureate World Schools offering the subject. The startup cost for a successful program is likely what prohibits many of these institutions from providing the courses, but the decision to create a film curriculum came in good timing for St. Edward High School.

The initial investment at St. Edward High School totaled around \$40,000. Available auxiliary funding from the state made the startup possible. "We went from having six Handycams to having really nice Canon DSLRs, sound equipment, dollies, and cranes," Stepnowsky said.



Left to right, film students Greg Margevicius '16, Connor Ling '16, Alex Hageman '16, and Kenya Gray '16 on the set of "Teenage Mansion." / © Hilary Bovay

Each year since that initial investment, another \$10,000 worth of equipment has been added to the program.

The significance of the investment was one of the motivating factors that led to expanding the program to include all students. The department started off with a single IB class made up of 23 students. Keeping the extensive resources of the program out of the hands of the rest of the student body did not align with the mission of the department. "We wanted to give [other students] the advantage of this hardware, too," Kuhar said. "It's kind of criminal that this would be in a cabinet for eight periods of the day."

The students' excitement about the courses also propelled the expansion of the department. "We saw these students wanting to stay after school until 5, 6 o'clock—until you had to throw them out of the room, they were staying after school working on projects," Stepnowsky said. "We thought, 'This is something we should be offering to everybody.'"

The teachers pointed to Ivan Schwarz, President and CEO of the Greater Cleveland Film Commission, as a key player in guiding the curriculum. An example of the way he helped get the ball rolling was offering the Film Commission's glossary of terms as a resource. That single list has proved to be a crucial support for the department, allowing students to learn the lingo of the industry.

"Let's say a kid ended up working as a bagel-getter on a film set. He's going to have the same language in class that people will be using on set," Stepnowsky said. "And when someone

is assigned to work as an assistant director, we give them a sheet that says what the phrases are to get the cameras rolling, and more. So if they were to go to an internship, they would have a shared language with professionals."

Having such on-set experiences and working on their own assignments is how students learn the study of film. "Everybody talks about learning by doing," Stepnowsky said. "In film, you can't fake it."

"I'm not going to stand up there for three days and lecture about the rule of thirds, I'm going to give a kid a camera and let him take pictures. We'll look at the pictures and adjust. They're learning by doing."

Andrew Flando is another film student from the Class of 2015 who is pursuing a career in the industry. Flando is headed to DePaul University in the fall. His animated short "Flop" recently won first place in the miscellaneous category at the iMagine Film Festival, hosted by Hathaway Brown.

"Film class was hands-on from day one and we were making videos with the film department's cameras and sound equipment," Flando said.

"In film, you quickly learn that you rarely work alone," he added. "Our film class worked together and we learned the importance of collaboration, time management and hard work."

This year, Flando's Advanced Film Class created a one-shot film, a video made up of a single take.

"Creating the script and filming took coordination from each student, who each played an important role," Flando said. "We had never filmed

a one-shot before, so we learned along the way. It took a lot of hard work but it was fun to do together and it was great to see it when it was done."

"The film classes at St. Ed's laid the foundation for anyone who would like to go on to study film in college and also taught important skills for any profession," he added.

Ivan Schwarz, who has been a friend of the department since its beginning, is an advocate for the work of the program and its students.

"I think they have one of the best high school programs in the area," Schwarz said. "And I appreciate the fact that they are giving the kids knowledge and insight that will help them even if they choose not to pursue film—they're certainly headed on the right track if they are."

"[Matt Stepnowsky and Nick Kuhar] deserve all the credit," he continued. "They're passionate and smart and excited to create filmmakers at the school. They're giving them a unique opportunity."

According to Schwarz, what makes the St. Edward film department a quality program is that students are not only creating films, they are receiving proper guidance from their teachers.

"If you want to make movies and engage in making content, it's really important that kids learn the right way to do it," he said. To Schwarz, good guidance means respecting the value and necessity of teamwork in filmmaking and understanding the many roles involved.

"Everybody who has an iPhone or an iPad thinks they are filmmakers. The truth is that if you look on the credits of any film, it is a collaborative medium," he said. "You can't just direct. You really

have to know what everybody else is doing.”

Schwarz is one of several local film industry representatives who visit the school regularly to talk about their work and answer questions. When he speaks, he wants future filmmakers to understand the importance of hard work and dedication in the field of film.

“I can tell them what they want to hear and talk about the sexiness of the industry, but at the end of the day, it’s a job; it’s not a hobby,” Schwarz said. “I think that’s really important for young people to understand: this is your chosen profession, it’s not a hobby or something you do part time.”

In order to prepare for a career in film, Schwarz said, there are many ways to make it. Studying film is not the only path to a successful career in the industry.

“Unless you go to a top film school like USC, Chapman University, or NYU, just go major in something that makes you a better storyteller, makes you more interesting,” he said. “There’s not just one path.”

Schwarz also mentioned that moving to Los Angeles is not the only option for working in the industry. “You’re going to be a big fish in a small pond here, where in LA, you’re going to be a guppy,” he said.

According to the Greater Cleveland Film Commission’s website, the future of film in Cleveland is big; the expansion of the industry has already meant a \$300 million impact on the area, the creation of over 1,000 jobs, and a \$1.84 local return on investment.

For this and more, Schwarz commends St. Edward High School administrators and teachers on building the film department. “It’s so exciting to see,” he said. “They should be very proud of their program.”

In its three years in action, the department has quadrupled in size, with more than 80 students now involved in producing films through the school. The aim of the program in the next few years is to expand the course offerings to create a four-year film experience. The department hopes to partner with other departments in the school to offer courses in scriptwriting, photography, production, and more.

“People who want to be engineers come to St. Ed’s,” Matt Stepnowsky said. “I would love to see that for our film program: start pulling kids who want to be film students who say, ‘I have to go to St. Ed’s because they have *the* film program in Northeast Ohio.’” •



TRIBUTARIES



FLOP



BLUFF



THE DEVIL DOWN SOUTH

PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS

COLLEGE ACCEPTANCES*

For the first two graduating classes of film students:

2015

Andrew Schumann awarded Tisch Scholarship to NYU's Tisch School for the Arts

Alec Battistoni accepted to NYU

2014

Jose Miguel Poblete accepted to NYU

Steele Wasik accepted to UCLA

**NYU, UCLA, and USC are widely recognized as the top three American universities for film production and film studies.*

AWARDS

NATIONAL

2015 WHITE HOUSE FILM FESTIVAL
Honorable Mention: "Tributaries"

REGIONAL

2015 HATHAWAY BROWN FILM FESTIVAL
1st Place, Drama: "Bluff"
1st Place, Miscellaneous: "Flop"
2nd Place, Miscellaneous: "Tributaries"
3rd Place, Drama: "The Devil Down South"

2015 VERMILION FILM FESTIVAL
2nd Place, Drama: "Bluff"

Honorable Mentions: "Nothing Changes,"
"Teenage Mansion," "Tributaries,"
"Papers," "Lights Out," "To Forgive"