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2023 Bill of Rights MyImpact Challenge
Project Report
Project: Student World Impact Film Festival (SWIFF)

SWIFF’s Website
Recognition from New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy
NorthJersey.com Article
NASDAQ Article

I. The Inspiration for SWIFF

As long as I can remember, I have been mesmerized by the magic of storytelling. As a young person, through film, I have the incredible ability to shed light on important issues and bring about positive change in my community. From raising awareness about social justice and human rights to promoting environmental conservation, I observed how films could spark meaningful conversations and galvanize individuals to take action. I was hooked.

Powered by a yearning for storytelling, I was determined to use film as a force for good. At age 11, I created my first film, “The Lighthouse” (2017). It highlighted my teacher who guided his students in their educational journeys, just as a lighthouse guides ships in the darkness. Creating it with only a cell phone, I was overjoyed when it was accepted to festivals—I felt heard! In the following years, I created three additional films focused on education and social impact. Today, I am proud my films have been accepted into 67 film festivals internationally.

After five years immersed in the film festival circuit, I made an important observation: the potentially career-launching film festival circuit is, unfortunately, inaccessible to many aspiring artists. Why? Simply put, submission fees. Traditional festivals charge submission fees—that is the established business model of the industry. But for a young artist, submission fees limit access to the festival circuit—a potentially career-launching opportunity. When I was submitting my films, submission fees of $20, $50, or even $75 per festival began to snowball, and I was left with a bill that I couldn’t afford to pay as a high school student. I felt quashed. The festivals I wanted the most had to be left out—I could not afford their fees. Only with exhaustive research for the lowest-fee festivals, I got my film submitted. But this experience gave me a keener appreciation for the thousands of young storytellers across our globe who likely face the same challenge. I began to realize the severity of the issue: access to a platform to share stories (a film festival) was disproportionately limited to those with financial means.

After five years of immersion in the festival circuit and my observations about inequity in film, I was determined to use my experience to help my peers: I was going to start a new film
festival. This would be a novel festival serving young filmmakers, where submission fees would be non-existent and marginalized voices would be prioritized. The Student World Impact Film Festival (SWIFF) was born!

II. SWIFF’s Project Plan

A film festival is the epitome of the celebration of film, and the Student World Impact Film Festival (SWIFF) harnesses the impact of a film festival in order to promote equity in the film community. To provide the greatest access to young filmmakers of all income levels, all submission fees are waived—making SWIFF the first festival of its kind where marginalized voices are prioritized.

SWIFF celebrates films with impactful messages by streaming films live to global audiences. These films have deeply moving messages, and each film provides a new perspective for attendees of the festival. This educates attendees about the beauties—but also struggles—that encompass the communities that define our society. SWIFF’s inaugural season was hosted in November 2022, which featured 3,120 films, advancing the film careers of thousands of students.

Additionally, SWIFF partners with Amazon to publish students’ films on Prime Video for worldwide distribution to 100 million potential viewers.

III. Details of SWIFF’s Execution

My idea for a novel film festival, SWIFF, quickly took hold, and after getting the initial details finalized, I was ready to launch. In May 2022, right before summer started, I got to work. I designed festival guidelines, screening processes, submission criteria, and award categories. When I published SWIFF on FilmFreeway.com to accept film submissions… my world lit up. It wasn’t hundreds of voices, it was thousands! Within one week, I received more than 1,000 submissions from student artists. For SWIFF’s first season, it reached a total of 5,476 submissions from 120 countries within 3 months.

I was exuberant, but explosive growth proved an equally colossal challenge. I struggled for days on end to keep up with viewing the thousands of films pouring into the submission site. I had a unique opportunity in front of me to help thousands of students, but the immense amount of submissions left me overwhelmed. Would I let my peers down? The questions lingered for days on end.

But this is when I had an idea that advanced my project profoundly: the idea to mobilize a global network of volunteers. In the coming months, I reached out to the students who
submitted films to join me in my mission. Within 2 weeks, I was able to onboard 607 volunteers who reviewed 200 films per day. In the end, we selected 3,120 films to be showcased at SWIFF 2022!

This experience animated the lesson of “it takes a village.” In my case, it exemplified how a team of like-minded, passionate people committed to a common concern to uplift voices could empower peers. Assembling this team has been the most rewarding aspect of my project. I have met countless students from everywhere in the world, from Italy to India; it has enabled me to profoundly appreciate the 120-country-wide reach that SWIFF has achieved.

During the next six months, from May to November 2022, to say I lived and breathed SWIFF would not be an exaggeration. My bedroom walls became a canvas for flowcharts, each one representing a different aspect of the festival's organization: from how the opening ceremony would unfold to the order of all film screenings.

Then, the big week came: November 13-17, 2022. A week to celebrate the voices that encompass our world! On Zoom, thousands of students exchanged laughs, smiles, and reacted with emojis during the films—it was an action-packed week. After the event, I discovered that SWIFF’s initiatives had generated more than 110,000 website visits and 3 million impressions. My initial dream had transformed into a global movement that mobilized 607 people and helped thousands of artists feel heard! SWIFF’s second season will be hosted in June 2023 and will feature 15,098 films from 120 countries, including the US, Nigeria, Ukraine, and Indonesia.

At the same time, I pursued diversified opportunities to magnify SWIFF’s mission. I developed 20 educational articles focused on equipping students with the resources to make their own films. To expand the reach of these articles, I fundraised a $115,525.56 Google Grant from Google. I leveraged this funding to create Google ad campaigns that ultimately democratized access to filmmaking education for 283,751 learners from 160 countries. Based on my campaign’s successful performance, Google has renewed my grant each month for $10,000, enabling the free articles to reach a community of 30,000 new learners monthly.

IV. SWIFF’s Impact - Part I

Since its launch in May 2022, SWIFF has successfully scaled to receive 18,218 films from artists across 120 countries who find value in the festival’s unique approach.

As I reflect today, nearly one year after SWIFF’s founding, it brings me immense joy that my work has touched the hearts of hundreds of thousands of my peers in 120 countries. SWIFF has helped 283,751 learners find their start in film via educational articles, empowered 18,218 students to advance in their film careers by participating in the festival, and mobilized a team of
607 volunteers and interns. SWIFF has transformed from an idea, just one year ago, into a global movement.

SWIFF has created a powerful space for thousands of students in 120 countries to share their stories, breaking down barriers and fostering empathy between people of different cultures.

Key numbers:
- 18,218 films submitted to the Student World Impact Film Festival (SWIFF)
- 3,171,592 impressions across all platforms (Google, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter)
- 283,751 people from 160 countries accessed our educational website resources to learn about how to express themselves through film.
- $115,525.56 fundraised from Google in grants
- 3,120 student films were selected and given global recognition at SWIFF’s inaugural 2022 season, and 11,896 films from 120 countries will be selected and given global recognition at SWIFF’s second season in June 2023.
- 300 volunteer film judges and 307 festival jury interns mobilized to join SWIFF
- 1,002 people registered for SWIFF 2022 as an audience and view filmmakers’ works.
- Received 147 reviews averaging 4.7 stars from festival participants.

V. SWIFF’s Impact - Part II

In addition to developing SWIFF as an accessible film festival, I have taken steps to ensure that it is a diversified initiative—serving students in all facets of empowerment.

In 2023, I led SWIFF to become an Amazon Prime Video Direct distribution partner, empowering SWIFF students with a platform of 100 million potential viewers. One film, Illusory, has already been accepted for worldwide distribution on Prime Video through SWIFF, and I plan to expand my partnership with Amazon to provide even more storytellers with a global stage.

Additionally, I launched the Film Sessions™ Podcast to showcase the unique stories of SWIFF’s participants. Thus far, I have interviewed 82 filmmakers, highlighting students’ stories to 1,034 listeners across Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts.

In 2022, seeking to bring my love for my pet bunny, Beanie, to the hearts of others, I authored and illustrated a children’s book: Beanie the Bunny Teaches Children about Filmmaking. The book guides youth on a filmmaking adventure with Beanie, featuring a step-by-step guide on storyboarding, filming, and video editing. I independently published it on Amazon in 2022, and in 2023, I distributed 837 digital copies for free to young filmmakers from the SWIFF community.
VI. The Important Role of Civic Virtue, Community, and Impact

Through the founding of the Student World Impact Film Festival (SWIFF), I have embarked on a profound journey of personal growth and exploration of civic virtues, with a particular focus on courage and respect. SWIFF has provided me with an invaluable opportunity to learn and develop these virtues while creating a platform that promotes equity and inclusivity within the film community.

Courage is a civic virtue that SWIFF exemplifies. In the world of filmmaking, it takes immense courage to challenge the status quo and amplify the voices of marginalized individuals and underrepresented communities. SWIFF has demonstrated this courage by breaking barriers and waiving all submission fees, ensuring that financial constraints do not prevent young filmmakers from sharing their stories. This courageous act opens doors for aspiring filmmakers from inspiring backgrounds, empowering them to showcase their talent and perspectives on a global stage. By fearlessly dismantling financial barriers, SWIFF fosters a more equitable environment that encourages bold storytelling and celebrates the courage of emerging filmmakers.

Respect is another civic virtue that has been at the core of my SWIFF experience. The film festival is a celebration of films with impactful messages, streamed to global audiences. Each film presented at SWIFF offers a fresh and unique perspective, shedding light on exciting topics. As I immersed myself in the selection and curation process, I discovered the transformative power of respecting and appreciating the multitude of human experiences represented in these films. SWIFF serves as a catalyst for building bridges of understanding and empathy among attendees, cultivating a deep respect for the richness of our global community.

In founding SWIFF, my personal journey of growth has been intertwined with the exploration of civic virtues such as courage and respect. The festival's commitment to waiving submission fees, celebrating diverse voices, and fostering global distribution has provided me with invaluable lessons in embracing courage, respecting diverse perspectives, and championing inclusivity. SWIFF has not only empowered emerging filmmakers but has also shaped my own understanding of the transformative potential of these civic virtues in creating a more just and compassionate world.