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Senior Builds Filmmaking Repertoire

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Sehaj Sethi expects a bright future working on film sets after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan University.

The senior English-writing major from Inverness, Ill., who is co-head of IWU's filmmaking organization, 9x9, has already helped to coordinate a film festival for Cinema/Chicago, a not-for-profit multicultural and educational organization, and worked on several projects for 9x9. A producer in her own right, Sethi has also made three independent films.

"In my films, I always like pushing the boundaries and doing things no one else has done because the moment you take people out of their comfort zones, you have their attention," said Sethi.

For example, in the opening scene of Sethi's third independent film, *Piccavi*, which means "I have sinned" in Latin, "a terrible act is combined with beautiful imagery and sound," said Sethi.

With one line of dialogue, "He weighed 155 pounds," Sethi presents the viewer with the first subtle clue that something is amiss, using this single phrase to manipulate the viewer's perception of the lead character's seemingly innocuous actions.

Both *Piccavi* and Sethi's first independent film, *Baby Boy America*, were chosen as official selections for Cinema/Chicago's 2007 Future Filmmakers Festival, which accepts film submissions from filmmakers 20 years of age or younger.

Undaunted by sensitive subjects, Sethi based *Baby Boy America* on a poem by Patricia Smith titled "Skinheads." The seven-minute film is composed of images relating to this poem.

"When *Baby Boy America* was showing at the festival, I was shaking and hyperventilating because I didn't know what the audience would think," said Sethi.

Sethi's anxiety about the film's reception was relieved when two viewers gave a standing ovation while they applauded.

"It hit me like a boulder to my chest. I was stunned that I had impacted some audience members that way," said Sethi, adding that the moment, which has remained a pinnacle in her life

as a budding filmmaker, marked her decision to use cinema as her medium to continue influencing others.

Sethi's fascination with film began when she was seven during her first trip to the movie theater, to see *Jurassic Park* with her uncle and cousin. "They were terrified of the film and I was head-over-heels in love with this magic movie world that came to life for me."

She attributes one of her teachers at William Fremd High School who "was as crazy about film as I was" with sparking her interest in the filmmaking process during her senior year. "Until I took his film appreciation class, I didn't realize what effect editing, sound editing, camera angles, or lighting had. After that, I was starving for information," said Sethi.

Upon arriving at IWU, Sethi began working with 9x9 and its founder, Mike Gabriele, class of 2007. Along with Gabriele, Sethi researched and compiled filmmaking equipment for the group.

Although film is not a major at Illinois Wesleyan, the University "offers students the chance to learn about filmmaking through a community of like-minded peers, and to create their own films with equipment matching that of any undergraduate film school," said Sethi.

"As a liberal arts university, Illinois Wesleyan provides its student body with all the tools necessary to develop their talents and build a solid body of work," said Sethi, who has to date shared producing, directing and writing responsibilities for seven films made by the student organization while studying English and history at IWU.

"I consider filmmaking my 'second major.' Whatever free time I have is devoted to making films because at this level, there's not a single aspect of filmmaking that the director does not at least touch with her own hands. I don't just tell the actors what to do and point the camera, I find locations, talk to people about where we can shoot, get equipment and purchase the costumes."

Sethi also credits her summer 2006 internship for giving her a variety of experiences in the film industry. As an intern for Cinema/Chicago, she helped organize the Future Filmmaker's Festival, served as a liaison between its contestants and the festival director, and judged several films.

Sethi plans to pursue a MFA in film production after graduation and will unveil her next independent project, a dialogue between a man who has just died and his murderer, tentatively titled *Death and Conversation* at the 9x9 film festival on Dec. 5.