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And the Emmy Goes to...

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By Eric F. Spina

A hush filled the nearly full Science Center as the credits rolled for the student-produced short documentary "Epicenter: Dayton's Opioid Crisis."

Several exclaimed, "Wow!" and "Whew!" Then, in unison, the audience rose and applauded what can only be described as a cinematic tour de force. Can we give this film an Emmy now?

"It's stunning technically, and the storytelling is spectacular. This is a gift," I told the nearly two dozen media production students who offered a screening of the 16-minute film during the Stander Symposium, the University of Dayton's annual celebration of research, artistic endeavors, and academic achievements.

This piece could be all about heartbreak in the heartland. Instead, it tells a painfully honest story through the eyes of recovering addicts in the Dayton region — everyday people caught up in a crisis that "knows no demographic."

Wanting to do justice to the stories, the students attended weekly Wednesday support group meetings for three months, getting to know the people they interviewed before even turning the camera's light on. The result: a powerfully, moving portrait of vulnerability, devastation and, ultimately, hope told by those living through one of the worst drug epidemics in U.S. history — law enforcement officers, reporters, social workers and, most importantly, recovering addicts and their families.

"The more hopeful people are at the end of this, the more they'll be inspired to be part of the solution," says Taylor Alexander, a junior from Washington, D.C., after the showing. We want to call the community to action."

Under the guidance of faculty members Greg Kennedy and Roy Flynn, the students took a step into a world most of them had never seen up close. The documentary's focus changed as recovering addicts and their families trusted them to capture the humanity behind the headlines.

“We went into this project thinking we would create something that presented the scope of the problem. It almost felt like we were sensationalizing the epidemic and begging people to do something, anything, to solve it. As the project progressed, and as we connected with more people in the recovery arena, we shifted the story we wanted to tell,” Taylor says. “Producing this piece was an emotional and overwhelming experience, but every minute was worth it.”

This is experiential learning at its best — and a reaffirmation that many of life’s greatest lessons are gleaned outside the classroom. At the documentary’s world premiere last week in the Sears Recital Hall before a standing-room-only crowd that included recovering addicts and their families, the response was the same. A standing ovation.

“To hear people in recovery say the film was powerful is the only validation that I need,” Taylor says.

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