

Passion and Joy: **KGTV's Lee Ann Kim** and the **San Diego Asian Film Festival**

by Kat Avila



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What makes San Diego's festival not just "another Asian film festival"?

First of all, the vacation-like atmosphere of San Diego. More importantly, we are incredibly artist friendly. We're all about supporting and edifying and encouraging our Asian American and Asian artists to keep doing what they're doing.

We're also a competitive festival. Filmmakers who enter their films are eligible to win an award for that particular category. The categories we have are short documentary, feature documentary, experimental, animation, dramatic narrative short, dramatic narrative feature, and we have a grand jury award. Most of the other festivals do not have that because the Asian American festival community is very tight. Everybody's friends with each other, so we try to make it as fair as possible.

We're the only Asian American festival that considers animation as its own category. Because we added animation last year, a lot of festivals are coming to our festival to recruit animation artists. We go specifically to certain schools - California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California, and Vancouver Film School in Canada. They have these animation programs - traditional animation, 2-D animation, claymation, StopMotion, and the ever popular 3-D computer-generated animation.

Going back to artist friendly, how do you promote that?



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These filmmakers will take out 10 credit cards, sell everything they own, then they have to go against the grain of their parents to become an artist, and then they put together these films with absolutely no guarantee that anyone's ever going to see them, especially these shorts. By the time they come here, we want to make sure that they're taken care of, so we hire a guest services coordinator who takes care of them from start to finish. We can't afford to put them all up, but certainly from the moment they come in they get a nice VIP bag, we have a VIP room that's open at the hotel 24/7, free drinks, free food, a place for them to hang. We make it a point to have a schmooze luncheon where the filmmakers can get together with industry folks. One of our goals is by the time these filmmakers leave that they feel like they were pampered and celebrated.

Tell me about your arts background as it does influence your vision for the festival.

Like every Korean I played piano for 15 years. During high school, I really got into break dancing. In my freshman year in high school, I tried out for the talent show. I wrote a five-minute rap, and I had this scratch-mix DJ. It was at this predominantly white high school in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. We didn't make it. I looked at the list and there wasn't a single non-white person on the list. So I went up to the lady - she was an acting teacher who was the judge for this - and I was very disrespectful because I was so angry. "You racist bitch! All you have are white people on this list! I practiced 16 hours for that rap, and I can't believe you didn't...!" And I started crying.

In the middle of this rant session, this teacher - he was the speech team leader - came up to me and said, excuse me, ma'am. I thought he was going to chew me out. He continued, "When you're done with this, could I talk to you about joining the speech team?" So I joined the speech team. In my senior year in high school, I won first place in the State of Illinois for humorous interpretation for Israel Horovitz's "The Primary English Class," where I played seven different characters, all of whom spoke different languages.

In college I told my parents I was a business major, but I actually enrolled in theatre. At Northern Illinois University, I was the only Asian in the theatre department. One day this teacher came up to me and said, we have the perfect role for you. The play was Emily

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Mann's "Execution of Justice," which was about the life and death of Harvey Milk, the first outwardly gay elected official in the country, who was shot and killed by fellow Board of Supervisor Dan White. The audition was for Joanna Lu, the Chinese TV reporter from San Francisco. When I was doing the role, everybody was saying, "You are so perfect - you sound and look just like Connie Chung." Of course, I look nothing like Connie Chung. And I thought I'm never going to get anywhere in theatre.

Which lead to journalism?

I transferred to University of Maryland and switched my major to broadcast journalism and minored in Spanish. It was a beautiful fit because I'm a great storyteller and that's what I consider journalism.

Who is SDAFF's target audience?

We're trying to reach out to the 18-35 age group, because the older generation is already set in their ways. We still have time to educate and foster discussion with these kids. What does being Asian American mean? A lot of these kids have never had an opportunity or a venue or a stage to be able to express, share, and hear what other people think about it. That's why our film festival is so incredibly important.

How much time do you put into the festival?

The festival is completely run by volunteers. I work 40 hours a week outside of my job, so I do this 24/7. For the next month before the festival, I'm probably going to be sleeping four hours a day, but I'm not tired, because I am completely living off the passion and joy of putting this together. The others who are involved with this festival are the exact same way.

From a female perspective, I look at each year as giving birth to a new baby. Right now I'm in that sixth to seventh month. I've just come back from the ultrasound, and I can see the face and I can see the hands and I can see the feet. It's really beautiful because I'm very excited to finally give birth again.

For more information about the festival, please see the San Diego Asian Film Foundation's web site at <http://www.sdaff.org/>.

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Kat Avila (buscandocalifornia@yahoo.com) regularly writes on issues affecting the Asian American and U.S. Latino communities. She maintains a web site on Chicano and Asian American theatre at <http://www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia/>.

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