

Coachella Valley middle schools showcase at Digicom

Written by Brett Kelman *The Desert Sun*
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James Workman Middle School 7th grader Jebari Wooten, 12, prepares a video camera to interview assistant principal Omar Tinoco on Friday, May 3, 2013. Wooten is a teaching assistant for Jessica Pack's video production class and has entered a film in the Digicom film festival that features films by Palm Springs Unified students. / Richard Lui/The Desert Sun

IF YOU GO

What: Palm Springs Unified School District Digicom film festival

When: Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.

Where: Palm Springs High auditorium

Cost: Free

More information: Learn more about the Digicom festival – or view

films from past years — by visiting www.digicomfilmfestival.com.

After the final school bell rings, two rival gangs meet for a showdown in a dusty desert lot on the edge of a Cathedral City. In the center of the angry mob stands Ricky, a middle school student torn between his allegiance to a cowboy gang and his love interest, Daniela, the sister of the leader of a skater punk gang.

“Why are we doing this?” screams Ricky, played by sixth-grader Devin Muñoz, as the scene around him descends into schoolyard violence. “I don’t know about you but I’m better than this – and so are you.”

VIDEO: [Digicom Film Festival trailer 2013](#)

This is the climax of “Identity Crisis,” an eight-minute film from James Workman Middle School that blends teenage clique drama with the classic conflict of Romeo and Juliet or Westside Story. “Identity Crisis” is one of 38 films – chosen from about 200 entries – that will be featured in the fifth annual Digicom film festival on Tuesday.

The festival showcases the work of Palm Springs Unified School District students of all ages in the Palm Springs High School auditorium. The event is free. It starts at 6:30 p.m.

The student cast of “Identity Crisis” was led by Jebari Wooten, a seventh-grader at James Workman. He has previously worked on two Digicom films – a noir mystery and an exploration of students’ daydreams – but said this film is far better than his previous works. Wooten can’t wait to show an audience of adults what a middle school film crew can do.

“Every time I see one of my films I say ‘Oh this is the reason I’m in this class.’ At the end it’s like all my hard work pays off,” Wooten said, turning to his classmates, sixth-graders who have yet to see their film on the big screen. “It’s going to take your breath away.”

The Digicom film festival began five years ago, and the student films have broken new ground year after year, said festival director David Vogel. The event began with an audience full of parents, who were thrilled to see their children in any film, but has since grown to stand on its own, attracting fans with no direct link to the students casts or even Palm Springs Unified, Vogel said.

The program reached a new peak in November, when the California School Boards Association chose Digicom for a Golden Bell Award for teaching with technology.

“We were up against every school system in the state,” Vogel said. “And to have a digital program recognized like this, when we know there are ones in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco and Silicon Valley – I think that was really wonderful.”

Before Vogel was making films with kids, he was making films for kids. The Hollywood veteran was once the president of Disney Pictures, where he oversaw production of family classics like “101 Dalmatians” and “The Mighty Ducks,” according to the Los Angeles Times.

However, despite his experience in show business, Vogel is still stunned by the honesty and maturity of the local student films. For example, two years ago, a local high school student made a rap video about how he learned to live alone after his parents were deported. The year after that, another student shot a daring documentary of her friend’s battle with scoliosis. This year, a self-reflective film explains how yet another student used filmmaking to cope with the suicide of her grandfather. And then there is “Identity Crisis,” which many be funny on its surface, but tackles the struggle to fit in like only middle school students can.

“People see the lives of others in film,” said Larry Fulton, another director of the film festival. “And in these films you can really see the lives of these kids.”

This year the film festival will give technology grants to three classrooms. The casts of a few exceptional films will be awarded with special prizes also.

(
CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated the date of the film festival. The correct date is Tuesday, May 7.)