



JULIEN DUBUQUE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

BY AMANDA MUNGER

If there's one thing the Julien Dubuque International Film Festival has mastered, it's the art of connection. Not just networking, but genuine small-town, Iowa-nice, hugs-not-handshakes relationship building.

JDIFF's filmmaker-focused approach is mostly thanks to executive director Susan Gorrell, who has been at the helm since 2013. She's hands-on



^^ NETWORKING AT THE JULIEN DUBUQUE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL.

▲ JULIEN DUBUQUE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SUSAN GORRELL.

for every part of the process, from reviewing films to planning travel arrangements to being available day and night during the festival. She wrote personal emails to every single filmmaker who submitted a

film to JDIFF this year—nearly 1,000 of them.

"I know how much time, money, effort, and heart goes into these films," said Gorrell, who produced a documentary called *A Million Spokes*, about Iowa's annual bike ride RAGBRAI. "So I make it a point to reach out to each and every person who submits to our festival, whether they were accepted or not."

Even this year, with no opportunity for in-person connection, JDIFF is making a major effort to celebrate its filmmakers.

At first, the festival was postponed from its typical late-April dates to late June. As the new dates approached, it became clear that the live event just wasn't feasible yet. So Gorrell and the JDIFF Board of

Directors decided to go virtual and run films on the festival's website.

To make up for the unique circumstances, next year's expanded festival—JDIFF's 10th annual event—will span eight days and feature both 2020 and 2021 official selections. Nominees will be combined from both years and awarded at the 2021 festival.

"We pride ourselves on making this festival all about the independent filmmaker, and it's harder to do that online," Gorrell said. "So I really wanted to make sure everyone had the chance to come here to Dubuque to screen their film and experience the festival fully."

Gorrell is most excited about the first-ever JDIFF Festival Tour, a way to theatrically release select JDIFF Official



LEFT: COURTESY OF DIGITAL DUBUQUE;
RIGHT: COURTESY OF BIG SKY DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

Selections in partnership with Cinemarketing.

“Normally they would never have an opportunity like this in a theater without distribution—especially short films,” Gorrell said.

The festival tour films will be shown at Phoenix Theatres in Dubuque, Iowa, in three cities in Michigan, and possibly at other select Midwest theatres this summer.

“This has been a challenging year for everyone—it has forced all of us to find creative ways to move forward,” said Cory Jacobson, owner of Phoenix Theatres. “This is the perfect opportunity for us to partner once again with JDIFF and offer some unique independent film to the Dubuque community and re-open our theatre with style.” **MM**