



## Beloit film festival touts its little-guy status

By [Duane Dudek](#), Special to the Journal Sentinel  
Feb. 12, 2016

Two small towns — Park City, Utah, and Beloit, Wis. — have more in common than snow. Both also host film festivals.

Park City is known for the [Sundance Film Festival](#), a giant in the field. But the [Beloit International Film Festival](#) is a spunky, funky David to Sundance's Goliath.

The New York Times even recommended it as an alternative to Sundance. The day the Times reporter visited, "there was a light dusting of snow" and "people were walking up and down the streets. It was right out of a Frank Capra movie," said festival director and co-founder Rod Beaudoin.

[The Times reporter called it](#) a "return to the spirit of film festivals' golden era" when filmmakers and audiences "talked film all night."

BIFF, the festival acronym, has been dining out on that story since 2006. But it has not been standing still.

In 2015, the film festival drew 8,000 customers. Its 11th season begins Feb. 19 and runs through Feb. 28, a.k.a. Oscar night.

This year, the festival will show 100 films, including 21 narrative and 26 documentary features, at eight venues, "five of them downtown within three blocks of each other," said Marty Densch, president of the festival's board of directors, former president of the city council and lifelong Beloit resident.

The festival promotes this neighborhood feeling among audiences and filmmakers.

When Sabrina Kahler of Milwaukee bought tickets online, "I got a reply email from an actual person" who gave her tips "on where to park and eat," she said in an email. He told her "they don't usually have lines to get into the films," which she said was her "biggest pet peeve" about the Milwaukee Film Festival "and why I stopped going two years ago."

Kahler bought tickets at the Beloit festival for "Clarence," a documentary that showed at the Milwaukee festival last fall.

### Raising Beloit's profile

Beloit is about 70 miles south of Milwaukee on Highway 43. The festival draws largely from Beloit and Janesville, with some visitors from Madison and the Chicago area.

"The Milwaukee market is hard to crack," said Beaudoin.

Since "literally thousands of people" frequent hotels and restaurants during the festival, "there is some economic benefit" to the city, said Charles Haynes, Beloit City Council president. "But in a less tangible fashion, it raises our profile in cultural affairs...and enriches the culture of the city and the region."

During the festival, filmmakers mingle "with the people they made the film for" in "much more intimate settings," said Densch. Audience members "take filmmakers out to dinner or buy them a coffee or beer" at places like [Suds O'Hanahan's Irish Pub](#) on Grand Ave., downtown Beloit's main drag, Densch said.

"We do what Sundance did originally," said Beaudoin. "We go into bars and restaurants and turn them into theaters" by bringing in projectors, screens and sound systems. "And we fill up with social events during the week."

Films are shown on Blu-ray, and regular venues range from 40 to 60 seats. Last year, 188 filmmakers attended.

The festival, formed in collaboration with Beloit College, has one screening at the school's 600-seat Eaton Chapel. (This year's is the silent film showcase featuring the 1925 version of "The Wizard of Oz," showing Feb. 27.)

And the film festival's headquarters are a downtown basement suite of offices owned by the college. Beaudoin operates out of a cluttered main office with leather couches, a desk, a glass coffee table and a whiteboard with names of filmmakers attending.

Last year, Beaudoin also became executive director of the Hollywood Film Festival, which became BIFF's sister festival. Held in August, the Hollywood festival highlights socially conscious films — "see good, do good, feel good" films, said Beaudoin.

## **Political baggage**

It's not unusual for festivals to have political baggage, and BIFF is no exception. Conservative businesswoman Diane Hendricks, who [donated \\$5 million to a super PAC supporting Gov. Scott Walker's presidential campaign](#), helped found the festival, and her photo is featured prominently on its website.

Beaudoin said Hendricks attends the festival and, in 2008, she was executive producer of two films shown: David Zucker's right-wing political spoof "An American Carol" and "The Stoning of Soraya M.," about the death of an Iranian woman. She also was portrayed, unflatteringly, in the documentary ["As Goes Janesville."](#)

Hendricks and her late husband donated \$40,000 in seed money to the first Beloit film festival. This year she contributed \$25,000.

But Beaudoin said it's a mistake to overestimate her influence. Any perception that her politics are reflected in the films is "totally incorrect."

"We've shown lots of controversial films and never had any slap-back," he said.

"We tend to stretch the limits" in subject matter "because we're concerned about our credibility." Among the films in this year's lineup is the transgender rom-com "Two 4 One," an LGBT festival prize winner.

But there are also plenty of feel-good films, like "[Cheeseheads: The Documentary](#)" and "[Right Footed.](#)" a documentary about a woman without arms who flies planes with her feet. Beaudoin said the latter received the highest score of any film when it was shown during earlier member screenings.

## IF YOU GO

A complete schedule and ticket information for the Beloit International Film Festival can be found at [beloitfilmfest.org](http://beloitfilmfest.org). Adult tickets are \$9, student tickets are \$5.

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