

Filmmaker documents nonprofit's humanitarian efforts in Senegal

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Salem -

The camera focuses on a dimly lit high school classroom in Dakar, Senegal, panning slowly across rows of tables that lack the usual textbooks, cell phones and backpacks.

In her footage of the AEDEC school, local filmmaker Debra Crosby captures the poverty that pervades a middle and high school with over 1,000 students where the Salem-based nonprofit African Music through Drums and Dance (A3D) donated 10 computers earlier this year.

Crosby's documentary short entitled "Peace, Love and Hope —You Make Them Happen!" debuts later this month at the Martha's Vineyard International Film Festival.

"Debra was smart to follow these things, to document everything," reflects Mamadou Diop, President of A3D. "Now the film is the real promotion for A3D. People can see what it is all about."

Crosby, who is director of A3D, says she has taken on the role of filming all the group's humanitarian projects. Intent on bringing the Senegal film back to recruit A3D volunteers, she did not originally view it as a piece of art. It was only after watching people react to

watching the film that Crosby realized it had a broader appeal.

"People ... were inspired and said they wanted to go on a trip there," she recalls. "I thought, there's a good story here."

At Diop's urging Crosby entered the film into the Martha's Vineyard festival where it will show with 14 other international films.

The making of a storyteller

Crosby found her way into filmmaking two years ago after working for decades as an actress and storyteller. Having grown up listening to her "Nana Maybelle" tell her stories, Crosby went on to work in Boston schools, telling folk and fairy tales to elementary school children.

The 43-year-old North Shore native says she saw filmmaking as just another way to tell a story. She taught herself the film making by watching Quentin Tarantino's documentaries. Tarantino, she says, is a major inspiration because he has no official film school training and has honed his talent through experience.

"I love people who want to do something and they just go do it. I like the challenge of learning through experience," Crosby says.

She has held a fascination for African culture since a trip to Kenya she took with a friend during her 20s where she got to live with a local tribe and learn their customs.

These days, in addition to making films, Crosby teaches acting at A Quest Actor's Studio, located in Artists' Row.

Later this year the documentarian hopes to return to Senegal to with a full-fledged film crew to record A3D's next humanitarian project.

Dancing through the streets of Dakar

Filmed over the course of 14 days, "Peace, Love and Hope..." follows A3D into the new computer lab installed at school where students sit their faces lit up by smiles. Crosby points out her favorite scene in the film, a close up of



a young girl scrolling through photos of polar bears.

"The opportunity for her to see polar bears didn't exist the day before," Crosby says. "There is such a contrast to what reading [material] is available in her life now."

While A3D was at the AEDEC School, Crosby says, four national newspapers and a TV station showed up to record them in their travels around the city. Crosby chuckles, remembering how one cameraman caught her at a village party dancing with some of the local women.

Before long everyone in the country was watching "the white chick dance like an African." Days later, walking through the marketplace, women approached her smiling broadly, shaking their hips, and shouting, "dancer!" in recognition.

While traveling through Senegal with her movie camera Crosby says she had the chance to experience tribal culture from a native's perspective. One day on a journey from Dakar to Tuba, Diop suddenly pulled the car of A3D volunteers over to the side of the road at a small village.

"He said, 'I want you to understand what true generosity means,'" Crosby recalls.

Crosby watched as local villagers gathered around them, treating them like family by asking if they needed food or a place to stay. Village girls were sent out to get fish and returned with buckets of them on their heads, ready to prepare a meal. Though Crosby says the group didn't have time to stay long having to move on to their next project, they lingered long enough to share oranges with the villagers and play a bit with their children.

"It is deeply embedded in [Senegalese] culture to help strangers," Crosby says.

Sipping gunpowder tea in her studio, dressed in an embroidered green Senegalese dress and wooden prayer beads, Crosby says, "I want to go back as soon as possible!"

The Martha's Vineyard International Film Festival runs from Sept. 13-16. The film "Peace, Love and Hope... You Make Them Happen!" plays as part of a program on shorts and films in progress entitled "Think Globally, Shot Locally" on Saturday, Sept. 15 at 2 p.m. at the Catherine Cornell Theater, on Spring Street. The event is free. See the Web site for more information, www.mvfilmfest.com, or call 774-392-2972.