



TV personality Montel Williams is interviewed at Thursday night's opening of the Garden State Film Festival. (STAFF PHOTO: KEITH J. WOODS)

Film festival focuses on indies, N.J. themes

By **STEPHEN BOVE**
STAFF WRITER

ASBURY PARK — The gathering crowd shuffled inward toward the Grand Arcade Thursday, eager to celebrate in grand fashion the opening of the sixth annual Garden State Film Festival.

In honor of the "4Chosen" premiere at

The Paramount Theatre later that evening, the red-carpet event was hosted by the film narrator, Montel Williams, and featured a special vocal performance by actor Danny Aiello.

"My grand vision when I started was to be where I am today 10

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years from now," said Diane Raver, festival founder and executive director. "It's just astounding to me that we have come so far so fast."

"4Chosen" chronicles the story of four young basketball players from New York who, while traveling in 1998 to North Carolina for a college basketball showcase, had an altercation with two New Jersey state troopers, who fired 11 shots. Three players were wounded but survived, and the state of New Jersey later awarded the victims \$12.9 million in damages.

A portion of the film ticket sales will benefit the Montel

Williams MS Foundation (www.montelms.org).

"The long-term goal with this festival is to stay true to our mission of being a community-based organization," Raver said. "I think that's the difference between us and a lot of the bigger festivals. They just aren't a celebration of independents anymore."

"I want to stay true to the indies, to the next generation of filmmakers," she added. "I just don't think that making another studio festival is necessary."

Raver said the festival has achieved a level of 95 percent of its feature-length films being picked up by a distributor, and of the 153 films being screened this year, 57 are New Jersey-related in some way.

"When I started in this business and didn't know anything, some very, very kind people were there to help me along," she said. "Thanks to them, I was able to be successful in a relatively short amount of time. Now it's our turn to help the next generation have their launching pad."

Ex-cop behind camera

And many of those next-generation filmmakers aren't as young as many would think.

"I started my filmmaking career in my late 40s," said Donna Roman Hernandez, a Newark

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native who founded Blue Force Films in 2005 — after retiring as a police captain with 26 years on duty.

"It's never too late to pursue a passion," Hernandez said. "And if that passion is filmmaking, then go for it."

Hernandez said Blue Force Films specializes in New Jersey-based documentaries and docu-dramas.

"I love New Jersey, so I support New Jersey," she said. "All my films are based here."

Hernandez will screen two of her films, "Closure" and "A Call For Valor," at 12:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. Saturday, respectively, at the Stephen Crane House.

The festival isn't only beneficial to those on the business' production end.

Actor Kevin Interdonato of Howell was honored as this year's Robert Pastorelli Rising Star Award winner.

"It's all indie filmmakers here, and those are the types jobs I'm getting right now. So basically, I came here prepared

to meet some people and watch some good movies," Interdonato said. "Everybody in this business talks about making it; well this is making it in my world."

Interdonato's film "Leeds Point" will premiere at 9 p.m. Saturday at Asbury Park's Fifth Avenue Pavilion.

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