

BUSINESSWOMAN

SF Film Fest Takes Intimate Look at "Girls in Trouble"

— By Leslie Lewis

IMAGINE LIVING IN SAN FRANCISCO YOUR ENTIRE LIFE and never seeing the Pacific Ocean, never feeling the tickle of cool sand between your toes or hearing the soothing roar of waves tumbling onto shore. The idea is inconceivable to most people in this metropolis famous for its breezy ocean winds, where bay or ocean waters border much of the city.

Unfortunately, as Public Defender Jean Amabile observes in the new film, *Girl Trouble*, it is a reality all too true for many girls in San Francisco's juvenile justice system. "The quality of these girls' lives is almost incomprehensible to most people. There are girls here who were born in San Francisco who have never seen the ocean — and the farthest away from the ocean you can get in San Francisco is seven miles."

Living in situations where poverty, parental drug dependency, or family violence prevail, many of these girls are forced to hustle in order to survive. Rather than leading a childhood most take for granted — childhoods that afford opportunities to dreamily build sand castles on beaches — these girls find themselves hustling in order to eat their next meal or merely find a safe place to sleep for the night. Eventually, they find themselves on the wrong side of the law in a system providing few alternative programs for girls.

Fascinated by the plight of these girls, documentary filmmakers, Lexi Leban and Lidia Szajko, decided to make a film that would add a new voice to the national dialogue on juvenile justice issues, shed light on the issues of the estimated one million girls who every year enter the U.S. juvenile courts and take an inside look at San Francisco's attempt to address the needs of girls in trouble.

This month, after four years

of filming, editing, grantwriting — the film cost an estimated \$250,000 — and working to obtain permission to film minors, court proceedings and the inside of San Francisco's Juvenile Hall, *Girl Trouble* will premiere at the San Francisco International Film Festival on April 24 at 7pm. Screenings of the film will also take place on April 26 at 1pm and April 27 at 4:15pm.

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[See box for more information.] The film, produced in association with Independent Television Service and KQED Television, will be shown next year on PBS.

Statistics indicate that while the youth crime rate in the United States has declined in the past decade, the number of girls in the juvenile justice system has more than doubled, and although girls now represent 28 percent of the U.S. juvenile detention population, they receive only 2 percent of delinquency services.

While boys entering the system are provided many options, including opportunities to enter group homes, girls entering the system are often sent back to the same living situation and given 6pm curfews. These situations set girls

up to "strike out." Add to this the desire to be on the streets rather at home because of an abusive parent, sibling or partner, and it's clear why girls often get caught violating their probation. Despite best efforts of public defenders, prosecutors and judges, the stakes are often raised each time a girl is caught on a new offense.

Girl Trouble documents the lives of Stephanie, Shangra and Sheila as they struggle to change their lives. As the film begins, they have previously been initiated in the juvenile justice system as a result of dealing drugs, cutting school or assaulting people. The girls

ing the girls' worlds, we begin to understand their seemingly insurmountable challenges, and how they endeavor to overcome them.

The girls are unable to wave a wand and magically make their lives better, but slowly and with help, they begin to take actions that improve the quality of their lives. As Stephanie says, "What it breaks down to is having people on your side, people supporting you, people telling you that you can get through and this is just a bad point in your life, and you have the whole rest of your life to live. For a lot of people this is just what they need to keep them going."

Girl Trouble is a thought-provoking, compelling statement of the successes, inadequacies, and inequities of the juvenile justice system. The San Francisco Film Festival has acknowledged the film's merit by nominating it for a Golden Gate Award. Szajko and Leban will no doubt receive numerous awards for this innovative film that spotlights the difficulties faced by girls in the system.

The film's young heroines and families should be applauded for their courage in allowing their lives to be documented. Their successes and struggles will assist other girls when the film is distributed to individuals and agencies dealing with juvenile justice issues. ❀

For more information about the film or to make a contribution towards the distribution of the film, visit the website at www.girltrouble.org, or email info@girltrouble.org or call (415) 786-8270.

work part-time at the Center of Young Women's Development in San Francisco, the nation's first employment, leadership, and advocacy program run entirely by and for girls who have been part of the juvenile justice system. At the center, they try to get their lives together, but solutions to their complex lives do not come easily.

As the center's executive director, Lateefah Simon, says, "These girls are pretty much their own mothers." She and other staff members of the center attempt to teach the girls to ask for what they need, stop to think about the consequences of their actions, build community, and think about their futures. But thinking about one's future is difficult when you need to think about where you will sleep this week. In enter-