

New Roads ready for its close-up

Seminar highlights growing La. film industry

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NEW ROADS — The rusted, 40,000-square-foot building that formerly served as the hub of cottonseed oil production in Pointe Coupee Parish has a new lease on life — courtesy of the motion picture production industry: New Roads, get ready for your close-up.

“I know you all remember that sweet smell of cottonseed oil and soy,” Marquetta Cheeks, president of productions for Emerald Bayou Studios in New Roads, said to the 350 people gathered at the Julian Poydras auditorium in New Roads on Saturday for the free workshop about working in the film industry. “I know I do.”

Cheeks, who was raised in New Roads and later started her Tinsel Town career as the personal assistant to actor Richard Pryor, has worked her way up the Hollywood corporate ladder and now owns the 106-year-old hangar-like former cottonseed oil plant housing Emerald Bayou Studio in her former hometown, along with her partner, Linda Thurman.

“A sound stage needs a lot of space because we build whole sets, whole cities, whole ships, like the Titanic, inside of these structures,” Cheeks said. “We also needed at least five acres of land, because we needed to be able to park our 18-wheeler trucks for loading and unloading equipment, and have space for our star trailers.”

Choosing New Roads as a home base also provides opportunities for area residents. “This could be something that could change your life,” said Victor Davis to the crowd gathered for the workshop. Davis was a casting director for extras on movies such as “A Few Good Men.” “If you are a carpenter, you may be building sets on a movie six months from now.”

Individuals interested in working in the film industry, Cheeks and Thurman said, need to prepare by completing a 12-week intensive course at the Louisiana Technical College in New Roads.

The dean of the school said the cost may be little or nothing for qualified residents. “The Workforce Investment Act office has approved this program as a training program under their guidance,” said Dean Amy Gauthier of the Louisiana Technical College in New Roads. “What that means is, they will cover the cost of tuition, books, fees, and tools if you qualify for the program.”

After finishing the 12-week course, film industry hopefuls should attend another course, “Homegrown Workforce Initiative.”

The difference between this course and the college course is best explained in dollars and cents: the “Homegrown Talent” program offered by Emerald Bayou Studios does not cost money to attend. Instead, Emerald Bayou Studios pays the students.

“It’s all about on-the-job training for the ‘Homegrown Workforce Initiative,’” Cheeks said. “The program is very intense, and it’s 16 weeks. At this point, you will be interacting with your crew member, who is your mentor, and you are actually paid a salary as if you are on the crew, and you are getting screen credit.”

Why are studios so eager to film motion pictures in Louisiana and employ local workers?

“In 2002, we passed tax incentives to develop the film industry, and at that time, we did about \$10 million in productions a year,” said Linda Thurman, co-owner of Emerald Bayou Studio. “Since that time, we’ve done almost a billion dollars in production in Louisiana.”

When a producer films in the state, the financial impact is both direct and indirect. “When a film comes in, it affects everybody and everything, because when we come into a community, we buy everything,” Cheeks said. “We have to feed everybody breakfast, lunch, and if it’s overtime, dinner, which means a lot of catering, whether it’s for 100 or 500 people.”

The local spending does not stop at food. “Everything from dry-cleaning, to restaurants, to hotels, are affected because we have to house all the crew,” Cheeks said. “If we have five crews, that could be 500 people who are buying from restaurants, who are staying in hotels, and who are having dry cleaning done, and going to grocery stores, and buying gas for their cars.”

The speakers at the workshop included the Emerald Bayou Studio owners, Larry Thomas, the chairman of the Louisiana Capital Area Film Commission; Victor Davis, casting agent for “Boyz N the Hood” and a number of other films; representatives from the International Alliance of the Theatrical Stage, and other people working in the motion picture industry.

Davis, a Los Angeles native who became a New Orleans resident after working on a Robert Townsend film set in the city, feels the motion picture industry is of special importance at this stage in Louisiana’s history. “We cannot let these storms beat this state,” Davis said of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to the crowd gathered to learn of how movies can impact the state.

“The people of Louisiana are resilient, and they will come back. One of the best ways to come back is this industry; the film industry is very big. It is imperative, that if it’s going to get any larger, it will be because of people like you.”

Although Davis spoke of possible local opportunities, one other guest related to film-industry hopefuls something more immediate. Filmmaker George Kostuch elaborated on the film he is currently shooting in New Roads, titled “Mardi Gras Massacre,” and the need for local support.

“April 1st at 6 p.m. in downtown New Roads, we’re going to be shutting down the street,” Kostuch said. “If anyone is interested in coming out, we need as many people to come out as possible.”

Kostuch said he films in Louisiana due to the recent tax breaks offered by the state. “As a filmmaker in Los Angeles, two things I lacked were funding and distribution,” Kostuch said. “All of the investors and financiers we have are all Louisiana people. If there were no incentives, there would be no investors, those guys wouldn’t be doing this.”

The filmmaker offered one more piece of advice to people wishing to be in his horror movie, which focuses on voodoo.

“Wear all black,” Kostuch said, “and bring a candle.”