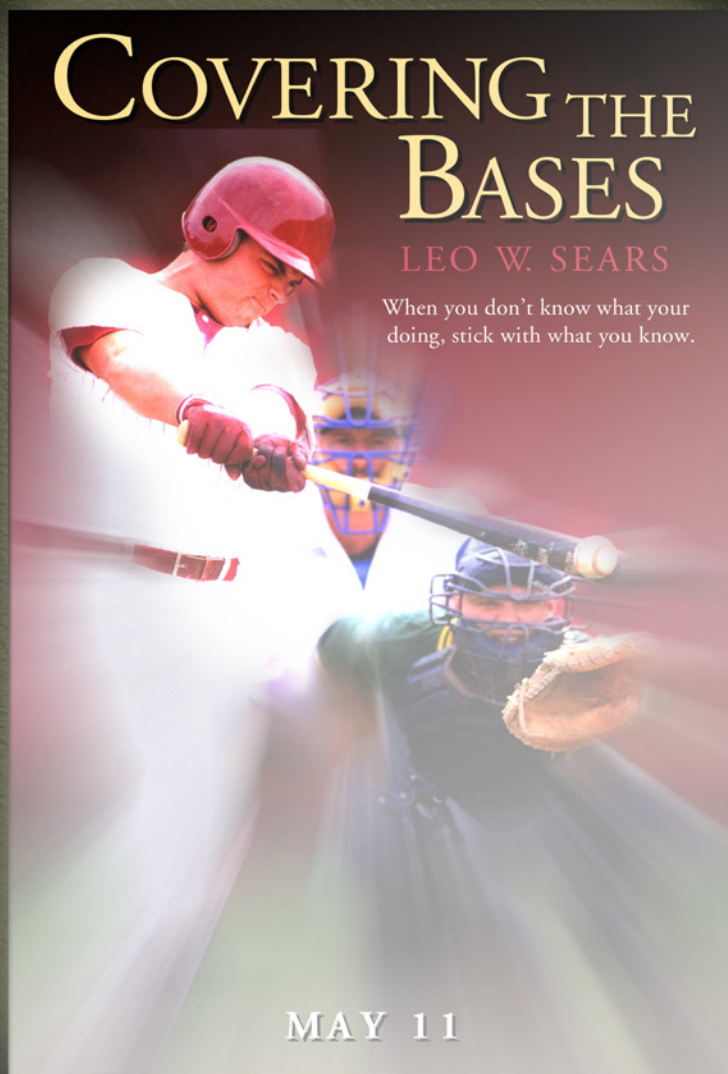


**NOW  
SHOWING**



The seed of creating the Big Island Film Festival was planted in June, 2002 at the Maui Film Festival. At a brunch reception for actor Greg Kinnear, I was seated next to Marilyn Killeri, the Big Island Film Commissioner at the time. I had attended the Maui Film Festival for the past three years and was impressed by the ambiance and operation, so I asked Marilyn why, if the Kohala Coast (also known as the Gold Coast) is such a great tourist destination, didn't we have our own film festival. Her response was, "It just takes someone to make it happen." At that moment, I saw an opportunity and a challenge to create a film festival on the Gold Coast of the Big Island of Hawaii.

I had never worked on a film festival, not even as a volunteer, but I had attended several as a filmmaker, screenwriter and as a patron. So I took those experiences and picked out what I saw were the best and weakest elements of those festivals. As we created the Big Island Film Festival, we realized we needed to cover two main bases, the patrons and the filmmakers.

When the Big Island Film Festival debuted in May 2006, we anticipated a strong local and visitor patron base. However, we figured visitors to Hawaii would be an important part of our audience members and since they tend to have more disposable income, their attendance would result in a large portion of ticket, pass and merchandise revenue.

During our second year in 2007, we polled the film festival patrons, confirming our projections in that we attracted 54% local residents and 46% visitors to Hawaii, to the festival. We determined this would be the ratio to expect in future years and therefore based our marketing strategies and budget on these figures.

With 20% of Hawaii's economy and jobs based on the tourism industry<sup>1</sup>, it is a very fragile industry. We learned this very quickly in April 2008, when two airlines, ATA – a 2008 Big Island Film Festival Sponsor, and Aloha Airlines, both of which brought tourists from the mainland, went out of business. Not only did this affect visitors coming to Hawaii, but it also caused the festival to lose the attendance of several filmmakers. Obviously, there was a large number of visitors who also were not able to attend. While on the mainland, an option for visitor patrons would be to drive to the event, this option is not possible when your event is on the most isolated island chain in the world. This was the beginning of a wake-up call on our part.

When we looked at our statistics for attendance to the 2008 Big Island Film Festival, the reality sunk in that our visitor numbers had taken a huge hit. Our visitor patrons had declined to a jaw-dropping 24%, with local patrons making up 76%. The good news however was that attendance overall increased 44 %. In 2009, with the weakening economy, our attendance took a dip by 120. So we knew we needed to change things.

Following the 2009 festival, we decided it was time to move the festival to a new resort as the resort where we had been the first four years was unable to meet our venues needs and despite agreements to the

contrary, our expenses continued to rise. So by mutual agreement we left the resort.

We had been in preliminary discussions with the major entities of Mauna Lani Resort: The Mauna Lani Bay Hotel & Bungalows, The Fairmont Orchid and The Shops at Mauna Lani and we discovered that the hotels had been looking for an event to get behind. The Big Island Film Festival fit their criteria. Not only would the hotels provide reduced rates for the visiting filmmakers and patrons and pick up two of our food and beverage events, but they agreed to also provide us with complimentary first class accommodations for our visiting celebrities and VIP's. In addition, the Shops at Mauna Lani not only had an outdoor area, but they already had a screen, projector and sound system, which would reduce our costs considerably. In addition, they also agreed to pay us to show our family movies at this venue; present our *Golden Honu Award* ceremonies, free to the public; and also help with all the advertising and marketing of the festival. It seemed like a win/win situation for all, so a five year contract with The Mauna Lani Resort entities was signed.

The start of the 2010 Big Island Film Festival found us collaborating with two four star hotels and a shopping center, including the public in free events, upgrading our movie venues, in addition to increasing our exposure with bigger celebrities such as: veteran actor Tom Berenger, producer/director/writer Scott Stewart (*Legion*), veteran screenwriter Ron Osborn and veteran actor Cary Hiroyuki Tagawa. These celebrities created a buzz on the internet and within the community, as well as becoming resources for our visiting filmmakers. We made extensive use of both Facebook and Twitter for the first time, as well as radio, newsprint, magazine and TV ads. We raised our daytime tickets by two dollars, but kept our other tickets and passes at their previous rates. The 2010 Big Island Film Festival had started to turn a corner with the positive move to The Mauna Lani Resort along with this year having 66 quality movies from around the world: Family Movies, Daytime Movies and Festival Movies.

Despite a weak economy and lagging tourism, these changes showed in our attendance which jumped 35%, with the percentage of visitors to resident patrons being 43 % to 57%. We succeeded in building the patron base and expect to continue to keep this growing in the future.

The second important base for the Big Island Film Festival, perhaps just as important as the patrons, is the filmmakers, as without their films, we wouldn't have a FILM festival. So taking care of this base was essential.

Our focus on filmmakers begins with our mission statement:

*"To celebrate the narrative filmmaker and narrative films."*

Our focus is on the narrative filmmaker; not the studios, nor the hype. As Founder and Executive Director of Big Island Film Festival, I want to make certain filmmakers are impressed by the whole experience of the festival. I understand the cost not only of getting here, but the cost of producing and marketing their films. We try hard from the moment films are selected to communicate with those filmmakers with as much information as possible and work to establish a relationship with the filmmakers, before, during and after their time at the festival in which their film was shown.

From the time the filmmakers arrive at the Press/VIP Party to the final Hawaiian music concert and the showing of the audience choice films, we shoot for the "wow factor." For many filmmakers this is their first time in Hawaii. We try to incorporate Hawaiian culture and music into the experience. What could be better than to watch films under the stars with gentle plumaria scented breezes wafting through palm trees? Of course it's even better if it's YOUR film being the one shown.

From the feedback we receive from filmmakers, we have learned we have a very special film festival. Even though we have just completed our fifth year, the Big Island Film Festival has been honored by *MovieMaker Magazine* three times: for being one of "Twenty Festivals Worth the Entry Fee" (2007), as one of "25 Coolest Film Festivals" (2009) and as one of "25 Festivals Worth the Entry Fee" (2010). Much of this recognition has been due to the feedback from filmmakers who have attended the Big Island Film Festival.

With over 5,000 film festivals worldwide, by covering these two bases mentioned in this article, the patrons and the filmmakers, we are confident that the Big Island Film Festival will continue to grow into one of the premiere events on The Big Island, the state of Hawaii and the U.S.A.

**Leo Sears** is the Founder and Executive Director at the Big Island Film Festival in Hawaii.

<sup>1</sup>"HTA chief: 'We are making strides forward'". Pacific Business News, June 20, 2009, p. 39.