SANTA ROSA » ‘THE PEANUT BUTTER FALCON’

An inspiring screening

Lead actor with Down syndrome thrills developmentally disabled crowd

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A different sort of hero movie drew about 66 people who live with developmental disabilities to a Santa Rosa theater Thursday morning.

They arrived in vans at Airport Stadium 12, said thank you for complimentary popcorn and soda snack boxes and settled into cushy, electric recliners for “The Peanut Butter Falcon.” Co-written and co-directed by a Santa Rosa High School graduate, the Mark Twainish buddy adventure co-stars a rookie actor with Down syndrome.

The free screening’s special guests were clients and staffers of Becoming Independent, the regional nonprofit that provides employment, life skills, art, socializing and other programs to adults with disabilities that challenge their self-sufficiency.

A popped kernel of corn dropping to the floor might have been heard in the theater when actor Zack Gottsagen told his new friend, portrayed by Shia LaBeouf, that though he wanted to be a pro wrestling star, “I can’t be a hero because I am a Down syndrome person” — one familiar with being labeled “retarded.”

Treated to the movie by the Tocchini family and its Santa Rosa Cinemas, the Becoming Independent clients and staffers gasped when peril confronted Gottsagen’s character, Zak, and Tyler, a scallywag on the run played by LaBeouf. “Uh-oh!” someone uttered when the new pala looked up the barrel of a pistol wielded by a blind man.

Many in the audience laughed at the antics and charm of Zak, and they put up a deep “Ahhhh” at the instant of a first kiss involving Eleanor, a volunteer social worker portrayed by Dakota Johnson.

Vigorous applause filled auditorium No. 8 as “The Peanut Butter Falcon” concluded and the credits rolled. A few of the people served by Becoming Independent shared their responses to the independent film.
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“...I didn’t think they’d make a movie about a person with Down syndrome that was fun,” said Jonathan Stuppin, who’s 36 and normally on Thursday mornings is at work cleaning a Mary’s Pizza Shack restaurant or helping to package food for Meals on Wheels.

“I liked it because it was surprising,” Stuppin said. Then he added, “Watching it with Becoming Independent was very special.”

Camille Bracy, 32, one of the nonprofit’s clients, was similarly effusive. She shared that she used to room with a woman with Down syndrome, and wishes her former roommate had been at the “The Peanut Butter Falcon” screening.

“I think she would really like the movie,” Bracy said. “I encourage anybody, everybody to come see it.”

Pondering the parts of the film she liked best, she said, “The beginning.” She liked how the urge to do something with his life despite some people’s low expectations for people with Down syndrome drove Zak to escape a home for seniors just as Tyler hits the road to escape the sinister crab fishermen whose pots he burned.

Bracy said she liked, too, when Tyler teaches Zak to swim.

“There were some real tear-jerkers,” she said. “It was very enjoyable. I would enjoy seeing it again.”

The woman who runs Becoming Independent the past six years, CEO Laura Vaetoe, was at Thursday’s special screening. She arranged it.

She read in The Press Democrat in mid-August about the opening of a movie made by former Santa Rosa resident Michael Schwartz and his partner in beginning filmmaking, Tyler Nilson. The pair wrote “The Peanut Butter Falcon” specifically for Zack Gottsagen after meeting him at a Southern California drama camp for people with developmental disabilities.

Vaetoe went to see the film, loved it and set out to see if a few dozen Becoming Independent clients could see it together.

She was thrilled but not surprised when the owners of Santa Rosa Cinemas, which operates a chain of movie houses in Sonoma County and beyond and is a supporter of BI, offered to host a special showing at Airport Stadium 12.

“You and I, we get to see heroes like ourselves portrayed in films all the time,” Vaetoe said. She welcomed a chance for people with disabilities to see the heroic story of a young man with Down syndrome — and to see it for free.

“...A lot of our folks are on very fixed income, so opportunities like this are exciting,” Vaetoe said.

She found that a theme of the film, that someone with Down syndrome should not be locked away but allowed and assisted to pursue his ambitions, is a crucial one. She said that over the years the culture and her agency have focused on including and supporting people like Zak, rather than warehousing them or subjecting them to programs irrelevant to their personal goals and interests.

Becoming Independent was born in Sonoma County in 1987 as the parent-organized Manual Skills Training Center. It evolved into BI after the 1977 passage of the Lanterman Act required California to provide developmentally disabled people with the services and support necessary for them to live as independently as possible.

Vaetoe said Becoming Independent serves about 1,000 people a year from its campus in Santa Rosa, Healdsburg and Santa Rosa. “They have a variety of abilities and they need support in some areas,” she said.

But she finds it as clear as the film projected onto the screen at Thursday’s special showing that people with disabilities want to be part of their communities, and the communities want that, too.

BI client Scott Kirkbride emerged from the theater with a smile on his face. He said he really liked Zak’s adventure.

And that wasn’t all Kirkbride, 25, liked.

“I liked the seats,” he said.