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Amy Calder

'Maine film awards presented at gala'

By Amy Calder, Staff Writer

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WATERVILLE -- Two local film producers, the owners of a Portland cinema, and an Augusta couple who supports the Maine International Film Festival were among those receiving awards Saturday night at the second Annual Maine Film Academy Awards Gala.

The gala to benefit the Film Festival was held at the Colby College Museum of Art Schupf Wing. The formal event was billed as Maine's version of the Academy Awards to be held tonight in Hollywood.

Lauren Sterling and Lyn Mikel Brown of Waterville received the GAL Award -- the Groundbreaking Activist Leader Award -- for producing a documentary about the play "Ugly Ducklings," which addresses issues of homophobia and teen suicide and was performed last year at Colby. The film documents the cast and crew's work on the play.

Brown, a Colby professor and co-founder of Hardy Girls Healthy Women, and Sterling, of Greater Waterville's Communities for Children & Youth Coalition, also helped to produce the play, written by Carolyn Gage. The documentary film was directed by Academy Award-winning cinematographer Fawn Yacker and will be nationally distributed to film festivals.

"The Groundbreaking Activist Leader Award is designed to honor a remarkable woman or group of women who have used the power of film to effect social change," Film Festival Director Shannon L. Haines said last week.



Staff photo by Jeff Pouland

Film producers Lauren Sterling, left, and Lyn Mikel Brown, both of Waterville, received the the Groundbreaking Activist Leader Award at the Maine Film Academy Awards Gala Saturday night at Colby College. They produced a documentary about the play "Ugly Ducklings."

Brown, the film's co-producer, said the community was very supportive of the issues explored in the play itself.

Sterling, the film's executive producer, said the making of the film was not a traditional social service activity.

"What has been so exciting about the process and this project is that we can create social change through film," she said.

Joel and Alice Johnson of Augusta received the Best Supporting Actor and Actress Never to be Seen on Screen Award for their ongoing volunteerism and financial support of the annual Film Festival.

"They're well-known to all our staff; they're well-liked," said Alan Sanborn, a festival programmer and one of the founders of Railroad Square Cinema. "We feel honored that they've chosen to support us all these years."

Joel Johnson hosts MIFF in the Morning, a winter film series held at Railroad Square. He was home with a broken ankle Thursday but said he and his wife Alice planned to attend the gala.

"It's nice to be recognized," he said. "We don't often have an 'Oscar' moment, so this is kind of a nice treat."

Joel Johnson works for the state Department of Health & Human Services; Alice Johnson works at the state Department of Labor. They see one or two films a week at Railroad Square and like the fact that it offers independent and foreign films not available in most other cinemas, according to Joel Johnson.

Steve and Judy Halpert of Portland did not attend the event because of a prior commitment, but the Portland couple is being given the Award for Best Artistic Direction.

As owners of The Movies on Exchange Street in Portland, the Halperts have made significant contributions to the presentation and promotion of independent film in Maine, according to both Haines and Film Festival programmer Ken Eisen, also a Railroad Square founder.

"They are doing it out of the love of film," Eisen said last week.