PLYMOUTH INDEPENDENT FILM FESTIVAL - KEEPING SECRETS: Filmmakers capture lives of miners, families exposed to asbestos

The documentary “Libby, Montana” tells the story of the small town that made headlines in 2000 when the EPA arrived for emergency cleanup after decades of asbestos exposure.

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This is the fifth in a series about the people featured at the Plymouth Independent Film Festival, July 21-24. We’ll introduce them each Friday in Life & Leisure.

When most of the major news media were pulling out of Libby, Mont., filmmakers Doug Hawes-Davis and Drury Carr were just arriving.

In 2000, the northern mining town of Libby, population 4,500, made national news when the Environmental Protection Agency arrived for emergency clean up after decades of mining vermiculite had exposed the town to asbestos.

‘We heard the news on Montana Public Radio and we thought, this is just the beginning,’’ said Hawes-Davis.

Hawes-Davis and Carr specialize in documentaries on environmental and national resource issues with their film company High Plains Films. They work out of Missoula, a four-hour drive from Libby.

“We were in a good position to record the events,’’ said Hawes-Davis. ‘‘We had no idea how things would turn out, but we felt we had a responsibility to document it.”

The resulting film, “Libby, Montana” can be seen at the Plymouth Independent Film Festival at 7 p.m. July 23.

For most of last century, the biggest industry in Libby was mining and processing vermiculite for the multinational corporation W.R. Grace. Vermiculite was used in insulation, soil and other products that were shipped all over the country. The vermiculite dust, which covered the town, workers and their families, contained a lethal form of asbestos that W.R. Grace and the government knew about.

Nobody told the workers. Nearly 1,500 of the residents have been diagnosed with some form of asbestos-related lung disease.

Hawes-Davis estimated that he and Carr made 30 to 45 trips to Libby for two and half years, staying for a few days each time. They let their cameras roll during EPA meetings, home inspections and visits from the governor as the story unfolded from a town learning of its past toward protecting its future.

“When we first went there, there was a fair bit of hostility,” said Hawes-Davis. The media-weary residents had seen major TV stations come in for a day or two and then leave. Hawes-Davis said that in the beginning the town was split almost evenly between those who denied that anything was wrong and those who had asbestosis or knew someone with the disease.

Gayla Benefield, a resident of Libby who helped Seattle Post-Intelligencer reporter Andrew Schneider break the story, led Carr and Hawes-Davis to the victims, several of whom have died since being interviewed. In this documentary, the people tell their own story with no voiceovers.

“We were trying to record these stories in a way that doesn’t include us,” said Hawes-Davis. “We want the viewer to feel like we’re not there. We let the viewer feel like this story is happening for them.”

Their first screening of the documentary was for Libby in March 2004. The townspeople packed the theater.

“It was a scary event for Dru and I,” said Hawes-Davis. “People were essentially looking in the mirror. Everybody there was either in the film or knew somebody in the film.”

He said it was a good experience, very powerful. There was no standing ovation, but there were a lot of tears and sighs.

“If you are patient and wait to the end, it is not a downer,” he said. “The town ultimately decides their own fate and they work hard. The community really took control. Libby, Montana is not about to go away.”

The film was released in September 2004 and has been making the festival circuit ever since, although they are also in negotiations with PBS.

Hawes-Davis and Carr did for $15,000 what most film companies would spend a quarter or half a million dollars on. They did it themselves, in their spare time while working on other projects, because they saw the importance.

“The film is not going to change anything in Libby itself,” said Hawes-Davis. “The plan of the film was to record these events and help people have some degree of understanding of how these things happen.”