

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Gidget documentary a hit at maritime museum

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With surf legends in attendance for the film screening of "Accidental Icon," the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum, Munger Theater sold out and had to open a second area for overflow seating.

The documentary tells the story of Kathy Zuckerman, the woman who inspired "Gidget" -- the character who broke boundaries to discover surfing in the 1950s and gave rise to the novel, television series and movies.

The story of 15-year-old Gidget -- a moniker combining the words "girl" and "midget" -- centers around a feisty girl who learned how to surf in Malibu long before women surfers were common and prior to the popularity of the sport.

Gidget became a role model to girls worldwide while simultaneously changing the surfing way of life after Mrs. Zuckerman's father wrote a book based on her unusual exploits.

Greg Gora, executive director of the Maritime Museum, expressed his excitement about the documentary screening's success to the News-Press.

"I've been here for 41/2 years and I've never had the theater sell out like this before," he said. "(Gidget) is an icon for female surfers."

Mrs. Zuckerman bounced in and out of the theater, chatting excitedly about the energy of the crowd.

"It's so exciting here," Mrs. Zuckerman said. "It's such a great audience. They're reacting so well. They are a surf community."

Mrs. Zuckerman, 70, said the screening is a tribute to her dad, writer Frederick Kohner, who died in 1986.

She was close to her father and said she is glad she can continue his legacy with the documentary.

Also in attendance was legendary surfer Kemp Aaberg, who learned how to surf with Mrs. Zuckerman the summer they were both 16 years old.

Mr. Aaberg, who was featured in the documentary, said that he thought the film did a good job of not only telling Gidget's story, but also demonstrating the development of surfing in general.



Kathy Kohner Zuckerman, the real "Gidget," poses on a surfboard before the screening of her film Saturday at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum
MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS

He reflected on the time before surfing was a sport.

"When I think back on it, I think about how fun it was to interrelate on a humorous level," Mr. Aaberg said.

It was via joking that Mrs. Zuckerman was named "Gidget."

"Having a captive audience provoked you to perform the most radical things in order to get rounds of applause from your friends," Mr. Aaberg said. "Kathy was a tenacious surf student. It was appropriate that she got named Gidget. Having a nickname was sort of a right of passage. It sort of acknowledged Kathy for her prowess."

Brian Gillogly, director of the documentary, said he was happy to bring the film to Santa Barbara because of the city's surfing community.

UCLA and USC also will host special screenings of the documentary, Mr. Gillogly said.

He is excited to continue sharing Gidget's story wherever it may take him.

"We keep getting offers, so who knows?"

After the screening, Mr. Gillogly, Mr. Aaberg and Mrs. Zuckerman addressed the crowd. Lin Bolen Wendkos, whose late husband, Paul Wendkos, directed the Gidget movie starring Sandra Dee, also answered questions.

"This is the best audience we've had," Mrs. Zuckerman said to the cheering crowd.

Fans then lined up for a book signing.

Lyssa Urban, who drove from Ventura to see the screening, said Gidget is part of Southern California's history.

"It was fun," Ms. Urban said of the documentary. "It had a great spirit and purity. For women who can do things that were and are unexpected of them ... and as for purity, when Kathy was surfing it wasn't for fame or to be a feminist. She did it because she was passionate about surfing and she was authentic."

Santa Barbara local Chris Soldo said he was interested in coming to the screening because his 12-year-old daughter is a surfer. He said growing up, he appreciated surfing from afar.

"I grew up in the East Coast," Mr. Soldo said. "California felt like the place to be. Now I'm here and my daughter can surf. It was a nice film."

"Accidental Icon" will be available on DVD Tuesday on Amazon.com.