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Race To Nowhere-Documentary Examines the Demands of Childhood

By Andrea A. Firth



Abeles interviewing Deborah Stipek, Dean of Stanford's School of Education, for the documentary
Photo provided

As one teenage boy described the stress he felt from the rigors of homework, tests, sports, and college preparation and the pressure to succeed in all these areas, he stopped to bluntly ask-and for what? This young man and several other teenagers share their stories of stressed out childhoods in the documentary Race To Nowhere. The film, produced by Lafayette resident Vicki Abeles, examines the impact of American society's achievement-obsessed focus on today's youth.

About 100 parents, mostly mothers and a respectable showing of fathers, recently viewed a rough-cut version of Race To Nowhere at Bentley Upper School in Lafayette. Abeles, an attorney and financial advisor who recently repurposed her skills to become a film producer, has been screening the documentary to adults and students throughout Contra Costa County and in other parts of the country for the past few months. As Abeles introduced the film to the local audience her voice cracked slightly, a surprising display of nerves for this confident, accomplished

mother of three that was more indicative of her passionate connection to the project than a fear of public speaking.

"My goal with this film is to generate a national dialogue," stated Abeles. "I want to place education high on the nation's agenda and narrow the definition of success in today's world for our children."

Like many, Abeles struggled to maintain the hectic schedules of her children, and she was struck by how the pace contrasted with her own childhood that allowed more free time to play and socialize with friends. She recognized that stress was taking a detrimental toll on many over-scheduled and over-worked youth, and that a change was needed. Although she had no prior experience in film making, Abeles saw a documentary as the best vehicle for her message and founded Reel Link Films in 2007. "Being a filmmaker is a valuable thing to do in our culture, because often positive change can come through films," says Abeles.

She assembled an experienced team of film industry professionals including Associate Producer Julie McDonald, a veteran of the film world with a long resume of blockbuster film credits. Abeles also recruited several leaders in the field of childhood development, such as Marin-based psychologist Madeline Levine and Stanford educator Denise Pope, to serve as advisors and to be interviewed as part of the documentary. She has personally funded the project so far and acknowledges that making a profit from a documentary is not easy, but that's not the point. "The incentive to make the film is the cause and the desire to create a movement in this area," states Abeles.

The film traverses a lot of ground touching on the broad range of topics associated with this multifaceted issue. Teenagers admit to cheating, abusing caffeine and prescription medications, pulling all-nighters, and in some cases opting out in order to cope with the demands of school and family. They describe bouts with headaches, anxiety, depression, anorexia, and worse. Teachers and industry leaders warn that the current education system, with its emphasis on tests, grades, and memorization, is creating a generation of young people who are unable to think independently. Parents worry about how to help their children to achieve both success and happiness.

At the conclusion of the screening at Bentley, the audience expressed no doubts about the film's depiction of the situation facing children today. As they engaged the producers in a lively exchange, one father asked a salient question-What do we do about it? "We are trying to create a movement," responded Abeles. "We are at the beginning of a long process to generate a national dialogue in order to galvanize change," she added.

Abeles hopes to have the film completed by the end of June, and she plans to work with other similarly motivated national organizations to extend the message. "We think all people who care for youth and the future of our country should have a chance to join in a national dialogue around best practices for education and raising our children."

A trailer for the documentary Race To Nowhere can be viewed at the Reel Link Films website www.reellinkfilms.com.

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