

# On Location with The Providence Children's Film Festival

The ninth annual Providence Children's Film Festival (PCFF) will take place February 16 through 25 in downtown PVD. The goal of the fest is to introduce people to film as a serious artform at an early age and to focus on the benefits of self-expression, artistry and connections that film can provide.

I spoke with **Eric Bilodeau**, the director of programming for the PCFF, who filled me in on how it all started. "The festival began quite organically," Bilodeau said. "A group of mothers and their children would meet at a local library to get their kids interested in stories and reading. At one of these gatherings the topic of children's films came up and how there were so few choices to offer kids these days. You could go to *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs 2* or *Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakquel* but they felt like giant marketing strategies to get you to buy the latest Happy Meal or plush toy. What about films that challenged minds, young and old? Foreign films? Documentaries?... So with many phone calls to find some venues willing to host a festival, and with the help of some local artists to design some promotional materials: A festival was almost born. Now [we just] needed to figure out how to find and book films."

The reach of the PCFF is truly impressive. From the RISD Auditorium to the historic Avon Cinema, from AS220 to the Providence Athenaeum, the PCFF provides the opportunity to experience 15 feature-length films, 145 short films and a plethora of activities, workshops and presentations. Plus, for the first time, the PCFF is hosting weekday field trip screenings, along with discussions and take-home classroom activity guides. Schools, afterschool programs, vacation care programs and youth groups are invited and encouraged to participate! To organize a trip, more information can be found at [pcffri.org/fieldtrips](http://pcffri.org/fieldtrips).

I was taken aback when I saw the festival schedule. The PCFF hosts seven to 10 events per day, for almost all of their 10-day fest! These include making animations as a group, and a day of live filmmaking presented by RI's **Give Me 5** children's filmmaking program, where participants team up to make a short short film in one day. Most of the events are within walking distance of downtown Providence, but there are events that take place in satellite locations like Barrington and Olneyville. This constant rotation of events allows for families with any schedule to find time to attend a few screenings and enjoy the festivities. It seems like the festival has come a long way from such a humble origin story.

Eric let me know how everything progressed. "For the first year we searched for films to invite to be a part of the festival. A year or two later we opened a submission site for filmmakers to submit their films. It was some of the most challenging programming I had ever done, but by far the most rewarding. You aren't just trying to find stories that appeal to kids. You need to find stories that appeal to kids and pass muster with parents," he said. "Another program that really took off was the Youth Filmmaker Show. You need to be a senior in high school or younger to submit a film to this show. We get hundreds of submissions a year from all over the state and now all over the world. This year we have three boys flying in from Japan just to attend their film's screening! These films, and all of our films, are juried in part by kids so we feel that the films selected resonate strongly with young minds. They select some very serious, true-to-life topics."

The PCFF is also dedicated to helping young audience members make connections with other cultures through the eyes of filmmakers from all over the world. Anisa Raoff, the executive director of the festival, has said, “We believe in the power of visual storytelling to transform how we think about the world and our place in it. By giving voice to people of many cultures, PCFF’s international films encourage Rhode Island children and families to embrace a global perspective — and find themselves reflected on the screen.”

The PCFF is another great example of the Providence arts scene attempting to create something unique and important, and knocking it out of the park. If you have any interest in exposing a young mind to artful, thoughtful film, the Providence Children’s Film Festival is handing you that opportunity on a celluloid platter.

*For more information, go to [providencechildrensfilmfestival.org](http://providencechildrensfilmfestival.org)*