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Coming Attractions: Lafayette man loses job, makes documentary

By Barry Caine
Oakland Tribune
Posted: 10/22/2008 04:31:57 PM PDT
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YOU GET LAID off, the glass is half-empty, that's how it is.

By the winter of 2004, B. Douglas Robbins had been laid off from a Palo Alto law firm for nearly a year.

He'd had plenty of time to wallow — and to mull new careers.

To fill the days, Robbins, now 38, taught himself "Final Cut Pro" and practiced recutting reality TV shows such as "Average Joe" — so that the "super-hot" woman ultimately chose the average joe instead of the male model, he says.

One thing led to another. A resident of Lafayette, Robbins and Joe Walling, an unemployed buddy, bought a mound of video equipment with credit cards, taught themselves how to use it and decided to make a documentary.

The result, "Debate Team," is being screened during the seventh annual SF DocFest, which runs through Thursday at the Roxie in San Francisco, then continues Oct. 31-Nov. 6 at the Shattuck in Berkeley.

UC Berkeley, Robbins' alma mater, provides one of the focus teams in the film, which explores the eccentric subculture of competitive college debates.

When he started, Robbins thought the odds of completing the project to his specifications were 50-50. At one point, he and Walling nabbed a shopping cart, modified it with closed-cell foam from Craigslist and plywood from his father's garage in Pacifica, then voila: instant dolly.

He estimates the final budget at between \$40,000 and \$50,000.

"Is there

a chance you'll get it back?" I ask.

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"It's going to be a struggle," says Robbins, who now works as an associate at a San Francisco law firm but says he has a few other ideas for films "rumbling around my head."

He and Walling will be selling their movie on DVD for \$24.94 on the Web at www.debateteamdocumentary.com, beginning Oct. 31. In the meantime, you can buy a copy at the film's remaining DocFest screening, at the Shattuck in Berkeley on Nov. 2.

"It's an exploration into the America fetish with championships and champions," says Robbins, who directed, produced and edited "Debate Team." This is a competition that doesn't just dwell on who wins, but even more importantly on who loses."

The film centers around the 2005 national tournament, a competition with 180 debate teams. Going in, the UC Berkeley squad was considered in the top 10.

"Only one team walks away a winner. The most common experience is you walk away a loser. In some ways it forces you to face your limitations in the world," says Robbins, who joined a debate team in college but became interested in it initially as a child.

"I was very young, between 5, 6 and 7. I often found myself retracing any kind of argument I had, especially arguments with authority figures — who said what, what's true, who was more right."

I ask, "How's that work in relationships?"

He says, "In relationships, it's a staggering unuseful tool."

For more on DocFest, contact 415-820-3907 or www.sfindie.com. Reach Barry Caine at bcaine@bayareanewsgroup.com.

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B. Douglas Robbins created the documentary "Debate Team," which screens during S.F. DocFest,...

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