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Wisconsin Film Festival: 'Paper or Plastic?' has it in the bag

Frances Provine
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The documentary "Paper or Plastic?" will be shown next week at the Wisconsin Film Festival at 11 a.m. Sunday, April 5. - Photo provided

"It doesn't matter what you do, but how you do it."

These are the words of Justine Jacob, producer of "Paper or Plastic?," a documentary on the National Grocers Association's Best Bagger competition showing at the Wisconsin Film Festival next week. It will screen at 11 a.m. Sunday at the Wisconsin Union Theater, and advance tickets are still available.

The documentary follows eight of the 23 state champions who competed in the 2007 nationals, candidates from all different backgrounds who share a common ambition to be the best and fastest grocery bagger in the country. Whether it's 17-year-old Jacob Richardson, the Virginia state champion, or Jon Sandell, the 60-year-old Minnesota winner, all competitors share a tenacity and perfectionism that would make even the most successful CEO shy away in intimidation.

Some, like bagger and mother Brenda Wygle, find their support in their families. Others find theirs in their work buddies, like Kim Weaver, whose co-workers dub themselves the "Flamingals" and meet once a month for food and drinks.

"We wanted to see how people did this differently, (people) of different ages, in different locations and everything else," said Alex D. da Silva, who directed the film with Jacob.

Ultimately, though, "Paper or Plastic?" is the story of the people all of us have met. As a supervisor in California suggests in the film, grocery baggers represent the "personal contact with the supermarket" that everyone in this country, no matter what income bracket or hometown have interacted with. Jacob learned about the competition while discussing first jobs with friends. One person mentioned grocery bagging and then added, "but I never made it to the regionals."

"It portrays a little slice of Americana," Jacob said.

"We really liked the whole approach of this being a celebration of someone who supposedly has a very simple job but it turns out it's much more complicated than that," da Silva said. As a short '50s-style clip explains halfway through the movie, bagging is about more than just throwing a bunch of groceries in a brown paper bag. One must bag from heaviest to lightest, using stiffer rectangular boxes to form makeshift insulation for breakable jars. Crushables like bread must go on top. And the bags, as the Best Bagger competition measures, must be as similar in weight as possible to each other so that customers can carry them easily.

For the participants, bagging is about even more than this. For Richardson, it's a job that's helped him break out of his shy exterior and form friendships. For Alabama state champion Roger Chen, an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago, bagging is a way of paying for his education and pursuing the American Dream.

"What we really like to do are positive, character-driven stories," Jacob said. And while Best Bagger competitors might be striving for an unfamiliar goal, "Paper or Plastic?" honors their aspirations without making fun of them. Its subjects are hard working, but also merry and welcoming, and audiences will connect with each individual's hopes in the same way they would at a sports match.

"We managed to visit 21 states, we went inside people's homes and talked to them ... and people everywhere are very thoughtful and generous and reasonable," da Silva said. These things, thoughtfulness and generosity, are things that, like grocery bagging, Americans everywhere relate to.

What "Paper or Plastic?" really comes down to is commonality. Like those three little words that all of us hear when we check out at the supermarket, the warmth and ambition that brings competitors and their supporters to the competition are familiar to all of us.

Da Silva will make an appearance at the film festival after the screening of "Paper or Plastic?" to answer questions and discuss the making of the movie.