



BLACKBIRD FILM FESTIVAL

12/17/2020

COVID19 IMPACT AND TIMELINE ON BLACKBIRD 2020

From the perspective of Festival Director, Sam Avery

While the COVID19 pandemic still looms heavy over the world at the time of writing this post-event summary, my hope for the future is that COVID19 will no longer be a threat to our way of life. With that said, I'm writing this impact summary for the sake of posterity.

January 2020

While brief mentions of a novel virus in China had appeared across various news networks at this time, no one within our community was concerned. In fact, most of us were very excited to begin work on the 2020 Blackbird Film Festival! Now entering our 6th season, the festival was the most organized it has ever been with strong Assistant Directors, clear objectives and an amazing team of event coordinators ready and enthusiastic. Additionally, Blackbird 2020 received the largest number of submissions in its history thus far along with substantial funding from a variety of new sponsors and grants! From my perspective, the festival was positioned perfectly to more than double in size from the previous 2019 season.

February 2020

Now into the second month of the planning process with the 2020 team of interns, concern around the "coronavirus" were beginning to grow but much remained unknown. Determined to keep the event planning process going, I reassured the staff that we were moving forward, and we began discussing ways to make Blackbird 2020 safe (hand sanitization stations, branded masks, etc.). Generally speaking, things were still going as planned at this point in time.

March 2020

As we moved into the third month of planning, it was becoming obvious that this virus was more than just a passing cold. On Wednesday, March 4th, I contacted SUNY Cortland's President, Dr. Erik Bitterbaum, and asked what his thoughts were on continuing with Blackbird as planned being that the college was Blackbird's main sponsor and venue at the time. President Bitterbaum invited me to attend the President's cabinet meeting on Monday, March 9th to discuss the issue further. However, over the weekend of March 6th – 8th, COVID19 took a drastic turn across the United States. Suddenly, the virus went from a lingering concern to a life-altering threat. Across the country, major events were cancelling. In decision that shocked the filmmaking community, SXSW announced on March 6th they were cancelling their massive 2020 festival just weeks before the event was scheduled to start. With the world collapsing around us, I had a conversation with the other directors (Mitch Ensmen & Julie Ficarra) on Sunday, March 8th and we decided that Blackbird 2020 needed

to be rescheduled. The next day, I planned to communicate this to the President during the cabinet meeting but by that time, the college was entering into emergency mode and I was bumped from the agenda. On Tuesday, March 10th I informed the staff that the festival was to be rescheduled and that we would spend the remainder of the semester working out the details of the new event.

Over the next few days, I worked closely with Meghan Lawton of the Cortland Visitor Bureau to figure out new dates for Blackbird 2020. We decided on the weekend of October 1st to the 4th so that the festival could collaborate with the fall Pumpkin Festival! At this moment in time, it actually seemed as if these new fall dates may be better suited for the festival than the typical spring weekend. Soon after, we sent out a press release to all the filmmakers and community partners, announcing the new October plan for Blackbird 2020.

However, around March 16th, the college made the decision to suspend in-person classes and essentially close down the campus to prevent the spread of COVID19. This decision sent the faculty, staff and students of SUNY Cortland into a disorienting spiral and completely derailed any and all plans the interns had for Blackbird 2020...

April 2020

The month of April was a very dark time for all of us as we attempted to adjust to the new normal of quarantine, social distancing, mask wearing and virtual life... Needless to say, the event planning internship for Blackbird 2020 crashed and burned. All the excitement and enthusiasm around the festival had totally disappeared and I wondered if Blackbird would ever recover. Much of the month of April was spent undoing all the reservations and programs that were created for the original 2020 festival weekend of May 1st – 3rd. As for the internship, the students were given several small tasks to complete on their own and sent home... One of the Assistant Directors, Gabrielle Buenerd, took the initiative to create a Crisis Management Plan for Blackbird during this time which will hopefully prove useful if something like this ever happens again.

May 2020

As the original festival weekend of May 1st – 3rd came and went, I reached out to all the current and former festival interns asking for help with a special COVID Festival Promo. Many of them responded and the "[Get Ready 2020](#)" promo was created. While the message is uplifting and optimistic, this remained a very discouraging time for Blackbird. Not only was the 2020 event in limbo, the submissions for 2021 dropped by nearly 50%...

June 2020

Over the month of June, the film industry took a massive hit. Film festivals across the country were cancelling, rescheduling or trying to figure out some sort of virtual solution... As a filmmaker myself, I was disappointed to learn that many of the festivals I had films scheduled to screen in were simply cancelling or moving online without any input from the filmmakers.

When it came to Blackbird, I was committed to hosting a live event and wanted the filmmakers to have a voice in the decision-making process. Therefore, I sent several surveys and questionnaires out to the 2020 accepted filmmakers asking for their thoughts and opinions on the matter. The results of these surveys showed that many filmmakers were unwilling (or unable) to travel due to COVID19 and the majority pushed for Blackbird to go virtual. With this in mind, I began developing out a hybrid outdoor screening event coupled with a virtual festival.

July 2020

As the summer marched forward, the COVID19 pandemic only got worse as the country became more and more polarized... Events across the world had been cancelled and there was no end in sight. It was around this time that I learned the fall Pumpkin festival in Cortland had also made the decision to cancel... Needless to say, the temptation to move Blackbird 2020 entirely into the virtual realm was very tempting but a part of me still believed this was a cool opportunity to try out some new ideas.

Originally, the plan was to simply shift the entire festival weekend of May 1st – 3rd to October 1st – 4th and change nothing but the dates. The times, blocks, venues and events would all be exactly the same... However, it was apparent at this point that this plan would not be possible. Not only were there social gathering limits of 50 people put in place across New York state but SUNY Cortland, our main venue, was limiting its in-person classes by 60% for the fall semester to reduce people on campus. It was obvious any sort of indoor event was not happening.

Therefore, I began working with the college to host a series of outdoor screenings using large inflatable screens in the football stadium. Things seemed to be moving along nicely until July 25th when I received a call from President Bitterbaum informing me that the cabinet would only allow the stadium cinema idea if the screenings were limited to students only – no community members.

While SUNY Cortland was one of Blackbird's major sponsors, the festival remains a community event supported by many smaller community-run organizations. Therefore, it was not possible for me to agree to these terms. As a result, President Bitterbaum had to regrettably withdraw all financial support for the 2020 festival as the college could not be connected to an event that may put students at risk...

That same day, I began searching for alternative outdoor venues.

August 2020

Earlier in the summer, I had read an article in the local newspaper about a pop-up drive-in at the NYS fair grounds in Syracuse, NY. After doing a bit of research, I discovered the owner of the drive-in was a local businessman best known for his fried dough stand, Pizza Fritte. However, I couldn't seem to find his contact info anywhere on the web and so I emailed Tim Fox of News Channel 9 – a man who knows

everyone. Sure enough, Tim replied with the man's email but asked why I hadn't reached out to the Greek Peak Mountain Resort?

As a Cortland native, Tim had grown up attending outdoor film screenings at Greek Peak much of his life. After a quick bit of research, I was very happy to learn that not only was Greek Peak still hosting outdoor screenings, but they had also just finished construction on a much larger Outdoor Cinema screen! Needless to say, I contacted them immediately and scheduled a visit.

On August 6th, I received a full tour of the Greek Peak Mountain Resort and knew immediately that it would be the perfect place for 2020! Within the week, contracts were drawn up for the weekend of October 1st – 4th and Blackbird officially switched venues!

September 2020

As the new October dates approached, I worked closely with Greek Peak to figure out the most ideal screening times for the drive-in event. It was around this time the term "Sunset Cinema" started to be used more regularly.

Additionally, a lot of time was spent sorting out the virtual festival platform. Many other festivals found success with sites like Eventive and Festivee but the pricing models for these platforms were very expensive due to the sudden spike in virtual management software...

After many failed attempts, I decided to build the virtual portal through Blackbird's main website using vimeo showcases as the main viewing platform. It wasn't perfect but it was free and easy for users to access. Unfortunately, promotion of the Sunset Cinema event was limited to email and Facebook advertising. Many of our normal marketing options through the college were no longer available since SUNY Cortland was no longer a sponsor for 2020.

October 2020

The weekend of October 1st – 4th was a relatively chilly weekend, especially after the sun went down... Regardless, the Sunset Cinema weekend was a mix of excitement and exhaustion. Unfortunately, most of the original 2020 interns had since graduated, and so I recruited a mix of former event coordinators to help with event operations. Surprisingly, there were almost no technical issues with the projection or radio transmitter, and we had a decent crowd of cars at almost every screening!

Immediately after wrapping the Sunset Cinema event, the 2020 Virtual Festival started and turnout was tremendous! Unlike with the live event, filmmakers from all across the world were able to engage and network with each other. We ran several virtual events including a virtual trivia night and several virtual Meet & Greets. The 2020 Blackbird Film Festival concluded with a virtual Award Ceremony streamed via Facebook live.

Despite the many challenges, Blackbird 2020 forced us to expand our reach into new and exciting territories!