

Mustang documentarian to share film with hometown

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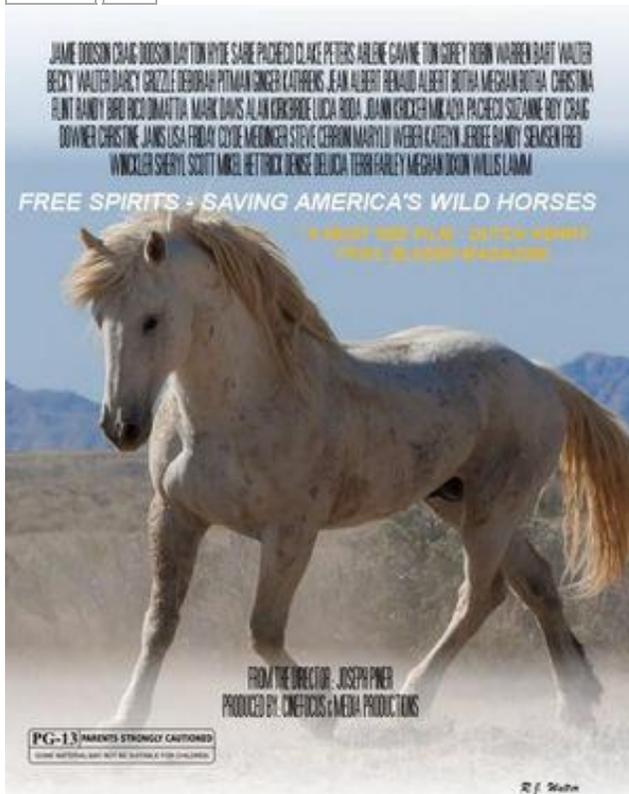


PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSEPH PINER

Free Spirits: Saving America's Wild Horses



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By Katie Tabeling Special to the Whig

ELKTON — It takes dedication to wander through the wilderness with a 12-pound camera in hand when there's only the slightest hope of catching a mustang on film.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSEPH PINER

That's just what documentary filmmaker Joseph Piner did for his latest project, "Free Spirits: Saving America's Wild Horses." This weekend, the documentary comes to Piner's hometown. The Elkton Municipal Building will host a free screening on Saturday, Jan. 31, at 5:30 p.m.

For the film, Piner conducted numerous interviews, collected archive footage and edited each shot taken in the three-and-a-half years of production. But for a story that focuses on the struggle to keep America's mustangs on public lands and away from the slaughterhouse, Piner needed to capture the horses on film.

"Finding the mustangs was the most challenging part, aside from raising funds," Piner said. He ended up staying in a cabin and walking at elevations at 9,000 feet while trying to capture the free-roaming horses on film.

Piner, born and raised in Elkton, became interested in mustangs in 2012. An associate in Texas informed him of a horse trainer that worked with a program for troubled Maryland teenagers in Parkton. After meeting the rancher, Piner saw that it was one piece in a bigger story.

He then traveled with co-producers Sarwar Kazi and Diane Kazi, both of Hockessin, Del., to several western states, from North Dakota to Montana, to capture the wild horses in their natural habitat. The production team used filming technology such as cranes and drones to capture aerial shots, Piner said.

"I just enjoy making films that matter," said Piner. "I hope that people just gain a general awareness of what's going on out in the West. That they'll walk away saying that they'll adopt or help a horse."

The film shows that mustangs are about to be extinct, Piner said.

Cattlemen and sheep herders support the horses being forced off the land, so that the lands can be used to feed their herds, he said. Advocates on the opposing side, including environmentalists and horse-lovers, claim that the mustangs help the land by grazing and providing natural fertilizer.

Rounded-up mustangs are sold to people looking to open their homes for companions. However, there is still a chance that a buyer could simply take the horse to a Mexican slaughterhouse for human consumption, Piner said.

“The mustang is an American icon. It helped build America; we fought the Civil War from their backs,” he said. “When you see it running wild, you see a will to survive. And I wanted to show how, as a society, we have to make horses valuable.”

More than 40 interviews were conducted for the film, including government officials and celebrities, such as Clark Peters from HBO drama “The Wire”, according to Piner. Robert Tree Cody, adopted son of actor Iron Eyes Cody, who was best known for the “Keep America Beautiful” public service announcement in the 1970s, also narrates the film.

For Piner, one interview stands out from the rest.

“There was a recently released prisoner from the Nevada State Penitentiary, and the prison had a program where they trained wild horses. The inmate said that he understood how the horses feel. He said, ‘We’re both marked with a number, and we both want to be free.’”

Piner, who founded production company CineFocus and Media Productions LLC more than 20 years ago, made the film for only \$30,000. He has made several independent films and films for the Discovery Channel.

“Free Spirits: Saving America’s Wild Horses” premiered in December at AMC Theatre in Las Vegas and the Mist Theater in Harlem. The film will show in Louisville, Ky., in early February, and Piner said there is a possibility that the movie will reach Wilmington, Del., theaters in IMAX in March.

“I’m incredibly proud of what we accomplished,” Piner said. “I hope that people take away that we can change things. We pay for public lands, and so we have a say in how the land is managed. I want people to know it’s not a western states thing; it’s a United States thing.” For more information about “Free Spirits: Saving America’s Wild Horses”, go to www.freespiritsfilm.weebly.com.