

# Parsons Sun

## Gilbert Baker Film Festival returns today and Friday

By Jamie Willey [jwilley@parsonssun.com](mailto:jwilley@parsonssun.com) Oct 3, 2019



After a one-year absence following the inaugural Gilbert Baker Film Festival, the event will be presented again Thursday and Friday at Labette Community College's Thiebaud Theatre.

The festival was first presented in May 2017 when Aaron Casserly Stewart, who was a city commissioner at the time, decided to honor the creator of the iconic rainbow flag that is a worldwide symbol of LGBTQ pride.

Baker was born in Chanute but grew up in Parsons before joining the Army and moving to San Francisco, where he created the flag in 1978 with encouragement from his friend, Harvey Milk, the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California. The flag made its first public appearance in the San Francisco Gay Freedom Parade.

Stewart wanted to organize a parade in Parsons to honor Baker, but Baker suggested a film festival instead. Baker, who planned to come back to Parsons from his New York home for the first time since leaving in 1970, died just before the film festival.

By 2018, the group that organized the film festival had lost a couple of key members. Others wanted to continue the festival to help Baker's dream reach its potential, but they didn't have time to organize last year, so they delayed the next event until this fall.

“We just couldn’t get the pieces picked up in time, and we didn’t want to put on a shoddy, slapped-together festival,” the Rev. Jennifer Dawson, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, said.

Dawson, Shelly Landers of Parsons and Scotty Zollars, LCC’s library director, have led an informal group to organize the event over the past year.

In 2017, the film festival included the showing of a few movies with LGBTQ themes as well as a film contest open to residents of the four-state area. This year, the committee organizing the event allowed entries from anywhere in the world, Dawson said, but there still weren’t as many as was hoped.

“It’s hard to get a film fest off the ground — especially a LGBTQ one — in Southeast Kansas,” Dawson said.

This year’s festival will feature the “Queer Animation Kate Jessop Retrospective” as the winner of the best animation award at 5:30 p.m. Thursday. It’s a series of animations exploring LGBTQ issues. That will be followed by two official selections for the festival — “The Date” at 6 p.m. and “Flunk” at 6:30 p.m. The festival will present “These Them,” the winner of the best web series, at 7:15 p.m. to wrap up Thursday’s showings.

“It is so funny. It’s lighthearted. It follows a young woman as she discovers she’s a lesbian,” Dawson said.

The film features LGBTQ characters as they try to get along in the world and face difficulties in the workplace.

Friday’s schedule will begin at 5 p.m. with speaker Thomas Witt, executive director of Equality Kansas, which works to secure equal rights for lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender Kansans.

The festival premier will be “The Whistle,” which will be presented at 6:15 p.m. Friday. The winner of the best documentary and the best in festival awards is a film that tells the story of a secret code created by and shared among young lesbians in 1970s and ’80s Albuquerque, New Mexico, as a means of self-identification and finding community. Dawson said the documentary is “very well done and very educational.”

The winner of the best short film award, "Spectrum," will be shown at 7:30 p.m. It's for mature audiences only and explores how a diverse array of lives intersect over one night in the gay village of Manchester, England.

Like in 2017, the festival also may include a short rainbow flag raising ceremony on the concourse between the LCC Student Union and Main Building, but Dawson was unsure about that detail.

Tickets for the festival will be sold at the door and at [filmfreeway.com/GilbertBakerFlimFestival/tickets](http://filmfreeway.com/GilbertBakerFlimFestival/tickets). A two-day pass costs \$25, and a one-day pass costs \$15.

Dawson said besides honoring Baker and his rainbow flag legacy in his former hometown, the festival organizers' goal is to showcase LGBTQ films and the stories of LGBTQ people. She is hopeful the festival will be well received. She was able to raise money for the event through a birthday Facebook fundraiser. The committee organized the festival for the weekend of the Parsons High School Golden Anniversary and hopes that some of Baker's classmates will attend.

"People really want to hear the stories of the LGBT community and help people realize that LGBT people are people," Dawson said.

Dawson and the other committee members are confident the film festival will gain some steam, attract more film entries and grow in the future.

"As people see that we actually exist — and that it's a lot of fun — I think we'll grow, and that will be good for the community," Dawson said.

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