

Cameras roll on immigration debate

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Marcilio Filho is a Brazilian immigrant, in the country illegally, who works three jobs to support his family. Patrick O'Brien, also a husband and father, is a landscaper who is losing customers to Filho, who can charge less because he doesn't pay taxes.

These two fictional characters clash in Hopkinton resident Karen Webb's "Green Grass," which won second prize for short screenplays in the 2007 Vail Film Festival Screenwriting Competition.

Filming of "Green Grass" in Framingham and Hopkinton is scheduled to wrap this week, and Webb, 42, said she plans to submit the film to the Sundance Film Festival and other national and international competitions in the hope it will get picked up for distribution.

The story hits close to home for some of the cast and crew.

"I'm a resident here, but I feel discrimination," said Lucas Constante, a Brazilian immigrant who plays Filho in the film.

Like his character, Constante came to the United States to "look for a better life" and he also works long hours (in his case at a sign-making company) to help his family back in Brazil.

"I love this story. It's very real in my opinion," he said between takes last Saturday in Webb's Hopkinton neighborhood. "It tries to show both sides."

The screenplay also is personal for Webb's co producer Dawn Morrissey, a Waltham resident who is an immigrant from Ireland.

Years ago her first US job was on Martha's Vineyard, where she worked alongside Brazilian, Mexican, and other Irish immigrants, she said.

Although Morrissey, 38, has a green card, many of her friends don't, and over the years they have encountered all kinds of problems as a result -- worrying about health coverage if they got hurt on the job, for example, she said. So the script immediately grabbed her.

"I could see the fact we could easily market this to the festivals because it's such a hot-button topic," said Morrissey, who helps run the Magners Irish Film Festival (formerly the Boston Irish Film Festival).

Webb's neighborhood, with large houses overlooking meticulously landscaped yards, is exactly the type of place where a drama like the one she has written would play out, which she freely acknowledges.

"It was kind of the inspiration for the story," she said. "I was in my living room with the big picture windows open watching the lawn being mowed with my laptop in front of me."

The film has a budget of about \$18,000. The cast and crew, even those from the Screen Actors Guild, are largely deferring payment until the film finds some success. A significant chunk of the money, \$5,000, came from an "anonymous venture capitalist," said Webb.

Excitement over the film was palpable throughout the cast and crew Saturday. Sprawled out on the manicured lawn of one of Webb's neighbors, the crew and a growing crowd of spectators watched a scene where Filho is arrested after a traffic accident for driving without a license.

A couple of Webb's neighbors drank white wine out of plastic tumblers, a production assistant helped Webb's 8-year-old daughter perfect her handstands, and everyone passed around bug spray as the mosquitoes came out. A 30-foot "jimmy jib" -- a crane with a camera attached -- hovered, dipping in and out of the scene.

Two Hopkinton police officers played officers in the arrest scene. One of them, Tim Brennan, consulted with Jeff Craddock, the director, on what language he would really use in such a situation. Later, he said he sees fake licenses all the time and theorizes that "someone in Framingham is making a lot of money." Framingham is home to a large Brazilian immigrant population.

Despite the seriousness of the theme, Brennan was clearly having fun with his 15 minutes of fame.

"This could be my big break," he said. "I don't want to mess up my line. This could get me out of polyester."

During last Sunday's shooting, the cast and crew got to see firsthand what the immigration debate looks like. Jim and Joe Rizoli, twin brothers who have been the most visible and vocal opponents to illegal immigration in Framingham, tried to videotape part of the shoot outside a Brazilian bakery there.

Webb said it was distracting, and they never asked permission, so a crew member asked the Rizolis to stop videotaping.

Jim Rizoli said he objected to how the protesters were being portrayed in the film, holding signs like "Brazilians Go Home. This is Our Country."

"We would never, ever attack the Brazilians personally," he said. "We might say 'Illegal Aliens Get out of Town' or whatever."

He said he was concerned that protesters like him were going to be portrayed as too militant or as vigilantes.

Webb called their tactics "heavy-handed," referring to videotapes they post online of local Brazilian immigrants. She said she hopes her film can show both sides of the debate.

"We wanted people to see the human side of the immigration issue instead of just the politics," she said.

For more information about the film, go to greengrassfilm.com.

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