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The docs of the bay

Local filmmakers tell good-news stories

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Fluctuating stock markets, dwindling energy sources, school shootings, dubious tax cuts — plenty of stories are out there, and all of 'em bad.

But two Bay Area documentary filmmakers recently snooped around the world and found real-life stories worth telling, and the news feels good.

This week, Tom Weidlinger's "Boys Will Be Men" and Gunnar Madsen's "Svetlana Village: The Camphill Experience in Russia" have their Bay Area premieres at special benefit events this week.

Shot on digital video, both movies were filmed in various parts of the world and completed here. Though they couldn't be more different in subject matter, they share a heartwarming humanist quality and celebrate people who go out of their way to make the world better.

"Boys Will Be Men" explores the strange "boy code" that all male children have foisted upon them, almost unconsciously, from an early age.

The Berkeley-based Weidlinger, who's been making films for public television for 25 years, takes a look at how living up to the "boy code" — i.e. hiding feelings — causes boys to become depressed and even violent. But Weidlinger found two programs designed to help.

The first is a three-week wilderness survival trip in which six troubled boys are taken to the desert and taught the basics of surviving, learning teamwork, trust and developing confidence. One boy continually bullies another; a counselor takes the bully aside for 24 hours. Over time, the film tells us, every bully will break down and cry if you sit and talk with him long enough.

Weidlinger says, "A lot of kids who have been bullies have been the victims of bullies. It's sort of like a continuum, like a vicious cycle. What researchers are finding out is that institutions have zero tolerance for bullies, which doesn't solve the problem. You have to talk to them and give them a way to deal with feelings of low self-esteem."

The second program takes place over three days. A man named Michael Meade begins by telling a group of troubled boys a story about a half-boy who searches for his other half. At the end of the three days, Meade expects each boy to perform a poem of his own in front of all the parents.

"Michael is formally based in Seattle, and he works with youth at risk, mostly gang kids," Weidlinger says. "Because he himself grew up in Irish gangs in New York City. His interest is in helping boys find some meaningful rite of passage in which kids can express themselves."

For the film, Weidlinger assem-



Thanks for sharing: The documentary "Boys Will Be Men" explores how boys can rise above social pressures that drive them to violence and destruction.

bled a mix of upper- and lower-class boys.

"Michael points out that rich kids suffer in a different kind of way," Weidlinger says. "They have everything they need materially, but there's a kind of spiritual isolation that they experience. They don't really have a context to relate to adults. They're often left on their own. Money becomes a surrogate for communication."

Heads, "The surprise of 'Boys Will Be Men' is that boys' emotions and attitudes are much the same now as they were when I was in high school, though the fashions, language and music have changed. To this end, the film will probably work just as well 10 or 20 years from now. Unless, of course, we find a 'cure' for the boy code."

Weidlinger laughs, "I guess if the film becomes obsolete, that'll be a good thing!"

Harmony in Russia

"Svetlana Village: The Camphill Experience in Russia," also explores human behavior and the search for harmony, but in a different setting.

The film is based on experiences of filmmaker Gunnar Madsen's brother Peter Madsen as well as other villagers in Svetlana, a Russian town 90 miles east of St. Petersburg. Svetlana is the site of Camphill, an organization whose members are developmentally disabled people who support themselves in a farm environment. With the help of volunteer co-workers, they grow and harvest their own food, prepare it, and store it for the winter.

At the request of his family, Gunnar Madsen (whose vocals and music have appeared in HBO's "The Rat Pack" and "Sex in the City") shot the video, which describes a hectic week during the 2000 harvest at Camphill.

Though the film stands on its own as a compelling story, it's also a fund-raiser to benefit the people who appear in it. The Madsens hope to raise \$1 million so that the villagers can live off the interest, about \$3,000 per month, which is all they need.

One of the most important elements of Camphill life is music, because the village has no electricity for prefab entertainment. So the Madsen brothers' musical talents came in handy.

Though many of the developmentally disabled folks at Camphill were told that they would never be able to live by themselves — one person was unable to even put on a hat — everyone in the film has a job to do, from making bread to peeling potatoes, to more strenuous farmwork.

"Tasks are kept simple and handy," Peter Madsen says.

"We limit our use of technical supplies so that everything is done with their hands. If you put

them in a McDonald's and expect them to work fast and under a lot of pressure, they're most likely not to succeed very well. Efficiency is not theirs to offer. But they can succeed if you put them in an environment where their pace, warmth, and intelligence is taken into account. And the other thing is that they are asked to try."

Gunnar Madsen adds, "Many people have said that the volunteers couldn't get by without the disabled people. They ground everything... in a way that's so simple that everyone stops and reconsiders where they're at."

Though many people volunteers and visitors are shy when first approaching the disabled folks, those fears quickly evaporate.

"Being away from them, they become something else, or something 'other.' The Russian word for them is 'invalid.' That really carries a stigma," But Peter Madsen admits that through meeting the Svetlana villagers first-hand he felt comfortable right away.

For now, Peter has moved his family back to California.

"I'm the fundraiser for the village," he says. "I recently spoke to an experienced fundraiser who just put an end to my dream to get it done before July. They said to expect three years."

He will soon be moving to a similar Camphill community in New York, and mentions that yet another community opened in Santa Cruz this week.

"This is just the beginning," he says.

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Boys Will Be Men

Screens at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. The program also includes an audience discussion featuring the filmmaker: Joe Marshall, co-founder of the Omega Boys Club; Ricardo Carrillo of the National Latino Alliance for Elimination of Domestic Violence; hip hop poet Daveed Diggs; school psychologist Allan Gold and Rod Santos, associate dean of student advocacy at City College of San Francisco. Admission is \$10 in advance and \$15 at the door. For tickets, call (415) 392-4400. For more information, visit www.boyswillbemen.com.

Svetlana Village: The Camphill Experience in Russia

Screens at 4 p.m. Saturday at the Fine Arts Cinema, 2451 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. The program also features a question and answer session with Gunnar and Peter Madsen. Tickets cost \$7-\$15 sliding scale. For more information, visit www.camphillsvetlana.org