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Riverdalian's rehabilitation is captured on the big screen

By Arielle Altman

Eight years after escaping an abusive, cult-like program that had promised to wean him from drugs, Riverdale native Nick Gaglia, 25, has translated his disturbing experiences to the big screen.

After being well-received at the Slamdance Film Festival in January, *Over the GW*, his debut feature film based on his own experience, will premiere on Wednesday, June 27, at the Pioneer Theatre on East 3rd Street, between Avenues A and B.

Co-produced by Mr. Gaglia and his sister Theresa, the film depicts a brother and sister from the Bronx who become trapped in the rehab program in New Jersey where their mother has taken them as a last resort.

Instead of the 30-day stay they expect, they come to believe that they can be sober nowhere else, escaping only after two and a half years of brainwashing in which they were warned that if they left, they risked winding up in a mental ward, or even death.

Although partially based on the Gaglias' own experience, the young director said he researched several similar programs in an effort to "bring more awareness around the issue, because the more people who know, the better."

"When you tell people who haven't heard about these clinics before, they look at you like you have two heads," he told cast members, family, friends and fellow survivors who attended a private screening on June 3.

Filmmaking has been Mr. Gaglia's passion since he was 11, he said, so in addition to communicating the plea to stop "tough love" programs, he found making *Over the GW* to be cathartic. "I think everyone should make a movie," he joked.

Mr. Gaglia described the filmmaking process with an enthusiasm that led other survivors to praise his ability to bring something positive from a destructive experience. While he said that revisiting the painful memories was sometimes difficult, the process helped him gain perspective.

"I'm a filmmaker, and making films makes me happy every step of the way," he said, with a sparkle that made it difficult to envision him as the 14-year-old who was mired in behavioral and drug problems.

At the New Jersey clinic he was told he could never act or make films because filmmaking was a “drug industry.”

The controversial drug rehabilitation program, KIDS of North Jersey, closed in 1998 after the state started an investigation into its practices.

After he left the program – by jumping out of a van on the approach to the George Washington Bridge – Mr. Gaglia studied film at Hunter College, and, three years later, after making two short movies, he began writing *Over the GW*.

“My other screenplays had elements that echoed my experience there, so I figured why should I dodge around this? Why not dive right in?” he said. With hard work and family support, he did just that.