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[Las Vegas SUN](#)

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Columnist Susan Snyder: Film takes hands-on approach

Susan Snyder's column appears Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursday and Sundays. Reach her at snyder@lasvegassun.com or (702) 259-4082.

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Bryan Wizemann's Las Vegas isn't the one tourism officials want to sell.

Nevertheless, it exists. And the 31-year-old filmmaker and former Las Vegas resident exposes Sin City's dark underbelly when his film, "Losing Ground," opens at 4 p.m. today during the CineVegas Film Festival. It also shows at 1:30 p.m. Friday.

"It's kind of an unredeeming film," Wizemann said Tuesday. "It's a slow burn. You become wrapped up in the claustrophobic environment."

That environment is a typical 24-hour video poker bar -- the kind of small, neighborhood joint frequented by locals but invisible to tourists.

"There is almost no bar in Las Vegas without video poker. The 'locals bars' -- they are all video poker," he said. "Most people don't know that."

In recalling his own childhood, Wizemann described a Las Vegas many ignore.

"We had almost no money growing up," the Chaparral High School graduate said. "My best friend got pregnant at 12. My other friend's father would borrow his ATM card and clean him out."

The 90-minute picture happens entirely inside the dark, dreary bar. It was filmed in real time, which means everything is scripted to happen exactly as it would if viewers spent 90 minutes in such a place.

The people never go outside. They sit at the bar playing poker in its loneliest form while trying to cultivate relationships built on nothing. It's clear relatively early that none of the characters are winners at anything.

It's a setting with which Wizemann became all too familiar in the mid-1990s, when he watched helplessly as his mother struggled with a gambling addiction.

A once-successful Las Vegas mortgage broker, Wizemann's mother fell prey to an embezzler in late 1995. She lost her home and all of her money trying to clear her name. After filing for bankruptcy she turned to the artificial comfort of a neighborhood video poker bar, Wizemann said.

"I think she was able to throw money away because she hated it. She wanted to take control over

it," he said. "It was hard to watch. It was hard to be someone's parent and figure out when to step in."

The film's character Marty carries some of his mother's mannerisms, but it's not about her. It's about winning and losing.

Wizemann's mother has overcome the addiction and is again successfully working in real estate. She has seen the film and will attend today's opening with co-workers.

"She's starting to take a harder look at her experience during that time," he said. "And I have to commend her that she is able to roll with the fact that we're being very honest about an unflattering time in her life."

Wizemann, a Cornell University graduate, originally wrote "Losing Ground" as a play. It had a monthlong run in New York City's Paradise Theater in 2003.

His next project, "An Entire Body," will explore the lives of a single mother and her 8-year-old daughter barely getting by in Las Vegas. Wizemann loves his hometown, but wants people to know it's more than what they see on the Travel Channel.

"It is a kind of Vegas that is underrepresented," he said.

For CineVegas ticket information go to www.cinevegas.com. For more on "Losing Ground" check out www.losingground.com.

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