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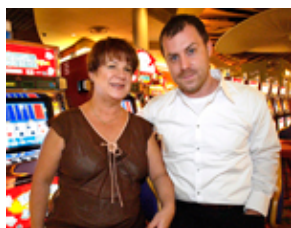
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'LOSING GROUND': Close to Home

Man draws on experiences from his mother's former gambling problem to make film

By JOAN WHITELY

REVIEW-JOURNAL



Las Vegas Anita Wizemann and her filmmaker son, Bryan Wizemann, pose after a showing of his film, "Losing Ground." The film contains his memories of her history with video poker. Photo by JANE KALINOWSKY/REVIEW-JOURNAL



Although Anita and Bryan are photographed in a local casino, she preferred to play video poker in a small, dark, intimate, neighborhood poker bar. She now only gambles if a guest wants. Photo by JANE KALINOWSKY/REVIEW-JOURNAL

When "Losing Ground," an independent film about compulsive gamblers, screened at the recent CineVegas Film Festival, Las Vegas resident Anita Wizemann had markedly mixed emotions.

She's an ardent supporter of the filmmaker, who is her son, Bryan Wizemann. But "Losing Ground" is a dark drama about the tenuous connections among six patrons and one bartender in a fictional Las Vegas video-poker bar. To create it, Wizemann drew on his memories of his mother's gambling. For about four years, ending in about 1998, she relieved stress by spending long hours and many dollars in a local video-poker bar.

During that period, Bryan Wizemann, 31, was not living here but periodically visited while he attended Cornell University, from which he graduated in 1995. A 1991 graduate of Chaparral High School, he accompanied his mother to the bar when he came back to town from Ithaca, N.Y., where he stayed after graduating Cornell. Looking back, he describes himself as a "willing co-conspirator" in those outings because he had reached 21 and enjoyed the gambling, too.

"Escapism is what I wanted to hit in the film. It's this little microcosm of people that seems to only exist in the bar itself. It's become this seventh level of hell. ... It's as if Dante's 'Inferno' was a contemporary story."

Anita Wizemann revealed her ambivalence about "Losing Ground" when her boss asked what she was going to wear to the film's CineVegas showing at the Brenden Theatres at the Palms.

"Oh, a veil," she says she replied -- to have something to hide behind.

"I have to commend them for programming the film in such a confident fashion," Bryan Wizemann says after the festival, in a telephone interview from his home in New York City. "CineVegas takes place in a casino. Our film

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has a lot to say about gambling and about Las Vegas."

Now that "Losing Ground" has been well-received -- both by film critics and the people in Anita Wizemann's personal life -- the longtime Las Vegas is more relaxed about discussing its content.

"I am not one of the characters (in the film), but I was in that situation," says Anita Wizemann, 56. She estimates she poured \$35,000 into video poker from about 1995 to 1998, playing three or four nights a week -- usually almost all night. She also estimates her winnings in the same time frame amounted to about \$72,000. Her figures are accurate, she believes, because she played on markers and created paperwork to document the sums, rather than playing cash.

Gambling was her way of coping with a painful, public crisis involving a former business of hers, MoneyLine Financial, a mortgage brokerage. The habit started after one of her friends, a loan officer, treated her to a roll of quarters when they stopped at a restaurant-bar one afternoon.

"I will never be able to forget the feeling," Wizemann recalls. "It was a dark place. Only he and I. It was afternoon, quiet. I had no headache, and I forgot about everything. And it eventually became my 'therapy.' "

She alleges the company's financial woes were caused by embezzlement by an outside voucher-control company that was supposed to monitor the funds deposited by MoneyLine's investors. But in the end no criminal prosecution took place.

Eventually she closed the company, turned in her broker license and repaid lost principal to investors out of her own funds. She lost her home, real estate and other assets in the process. She obtained a civil judgment against the company she had hired, but hasn't been able to collect her award.

During the litigation phase of her crisis, Wizemann began stopping off alone at a video-poker bar on her way home at night. In the bar, she says she felt like a winner, not only for her literal poker wins, but also because she was able to loan or give away small sums of money to other regular players who came in with complaints about not being able to make their rent, or needing extra funds to launch a small business. The players were merely acquaintances, she admits. "I started to hate money so much, it became such a pleasure to throw it away."

Today, Anita Wizemann is employed in administration at a local commercial real-estate firm. She concedes she was "troubled" during her period of intensive gambling, but questions whether she truly was an addict. She says she was able to stop cold turkey when her legal saga ended, without getting counseling or joining a 12-step support group. Today, she plays video poker only if she's entertaining guests. But "I can't stand it more than a half-hour," she adds.

"Losing Ground" is not a documentary about his mother, Bryan Wizemann emphasizes. "The conceit of the piece was always to develop the kind of claustrophobia" in a small, dark bar peopled by desperate, sometimes lonely or frustrated souls. The movie is 90 minutes long and depicts 90 minutes unfolding at the fictional bar. (It was shot at a bar in Brooklyn, N.Y., that is owned by one of Bryan's friends.)

He designed the story to show the "slow downward spiral that's inevitable night after night. You go up, and before you know it, you're down, you're out. There are all these tenuous relationships" between people who barely know each other. It's more about loss than gambling.

Yet, Wizemann did borrow some of his mother's gambling mannerisms for the character "Marty," who drinks only a single glass of chardonnay, plus abundant water.

Wizemann has written or made several films set in Las Vegas, none of which has had commercial distribution. He wrote and directed an hour's worth of film for "Genuine Bricks," which his Web site describes as "a story of adolescence, boredom and abuse in Las Vegas during the era of punk rock."

He has written and is hoping to produce a piece about a lower-income Las Vegas woman raising an 8-year-old daughter alone.

While in town for CineVegas, he scouted shooting locations. "It's a particular kind of aesthetic," he explains, entailing "a Boulder Highway motel kind of scene, check cashing, pawnshops. It's a mixed race and ethnicity kind of piece."

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