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Arts

[Cincinnati.Com](#) » [The Enquirer](#) » [Entertainment](#) » 'Cats' film aids homeless

'Cats' film aids homeless

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Linda Hattendorf was walking in SoHo in January 2001 when she spotted an elderly man "bundled up in hats, coats, scarves" sitting at a corner and drawing pictures of cats.

"I like cats, so I struck up a conversation," Hattendorf says. And that's how her documentary "The Cats of Mirikitani" began. "Mirikitani" gets its Cincinnati premiere in Cincinnati World Cinema screenings Tuesday-Thursday at Cincinnati Art Museum. Hattendorf will participate in post-screening conversations all three nights.

Hattendorf had been working as a film editor on independent documentaries for more than a decade in New York. She's been in love with film since she "grew up watching home movies" in College Hill, and then Anderson Township.

"My mom's father had shot them in the '30s and Mom (Ruth) would set them to music. She kind of created something. That was the first time I realized cinema can be about bringing together community."

During her Cincinnati years, she served up vegi-burgers in Clifton and worked on publications at Educational Theatre Association and Playhouse in the Park. But she always knew her career would be in film. "I'm both verbal and visual," Hattendorf says, "and film is where it all comes together."

She'd been thinking it was time to direct her own documentary when Hattendorf chanced on homeless Tsutomu "Jimmy" Mirikitani, born in Sacramento, raised in Hiroshima and, after returning to the U.S. in 1938 to pursue a career as an artist, was one of 100,000 Japanese-Americans sent to a World War II internment camp.

After their first encounter, "I came the next day with a small video camera - originally the camera was just a tool to get him to talk." Her visits became regular, "and he would scold me if I didn't bring the camera."

Hattendorf's original plan was to create a short documentary "and somebody would see it and come along and help. ... Then the World Trade Center fell down." And Mirikitani was still outside. "He kept drawing, I kept shooting." And Hattendorf became the person who came along and helped. That's part of the film.

"The Cats of Mirikitani" took one year to shoot and "four years to raise the money to edit and finish it," says Hattendorf. Since then, "Mirikitani" has won more than 30 international film festival awards, including the Audience Award at Tribeca Film Festival.

Hattendorf does have a new project in development. "It's about peace," she says, not ready to give much away.

She's also not about to give up too many details of the happy ending for Mirikitani in her film, but says, "Jimmy's doing great. He just turned 87. The birthday parties are getting bigger and bigger every year. And now he's drawing inside instead of outside."