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**STEPPING OUT**

# Film with local roots wins top prize at LIIFE

## Larry Strong discusses his war drama 'Cigarette Soup'

By Iris Wiener

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COURTESY LARRY STRONG

A scene from the compelling action film, "Cigarette Soup," which explores the struggles American soldiers face while serving in combat.

If there is one thing Larry Strong is sure about, it's that Hollywood is not the be-all-end-all location for success in the entertainment business. The accomplished filmmaker has tested the waters on both the east and west coasts, but continues to enjoy accolades from work he produces and directs on and around Long Island, a place that he holds close to his heart.

In fact, this July brought the Hempstead native the top prize, Best Feature Film, at the 17th Annual Long Island International Film Expo (LIIFE) for the thought-provoking film "Cigarette Soup."

The story of an aspiring journalist (Joshua Wills) who joins a group of soldiers in Afghanistan to

shed some light on the reality of their mission, "Cigarette Soup" is only one of many projects on Strong's resume. In 2006 he co-wrote, co-produced and co-directed his first feature film, "Serial," which featured "Dexter" star Lauren Velez, and went on to win Best Screenplay and Best Director awards at film festivals.

After garnering international attention for his co-direction of the viral video "I Got a Crush on Obama" (which has over 23 million views on YouTube), Strong saw more success as the producer of 2009's "Last Day of Summer," which featured DJ Qualls ("Road Trip") and Nikki Reed ("Twilight"). He credits many of his achievements to his education and the support system for filmmakers on Long Island.

"If you want to make a film and you live on Long Island, it's a lot easier to do now than when I first started," says Strong. The Long Island University graduate didn't purchase his first video camera until he was in college ("when I was young I wanted to be an astronaut, a comedian or a cartoonist," he laughs), but now it would be difficult to find him without a camera nearby.

"I've shot in West Hempstead. Uniondale. Bellmore. In fact, the final scene in 'Serial' was shot at Merrick Cinemas," he recalls of creating a chase scene, which even included a moment in the projection booth. "It was such a Long Island film. It was the first time we [he and frequent producing partner Kevin Arbouet] stayed so close to home for an entire film."

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COURTESY LARRY STRONG

A scene from the compelling action film, "Cigarette Soup," which explores the struggles American soldiers face while serving in combat.

Strong appreciates the network of filmmakers on Long Island, and says that it continues to grow. In fact, much of the cast and crew for "Cigarette Soup" are from the area. "Years ago you couldn't find that kind of talent here," he says. "Most people lived in Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan." Though the film featured multiple locations —including Queens' Fort Totten Park, Brooklyn, and New Mexico — some shoots took place at Nickerson Beach. "A lot of people have never heard of it because it's so private and quiet," Strong says of the Lido Beach spot.

originated with director and writer Damian Voerg, whose brother was a marine in the first Gulf War. The stories with which he returned home were so poignant that they begged for re-telling on a larger scale. "We decided to set it in Afghanistan because it's current and there are not that many films about the war in Afghanistan," says Strong. "The films that are about the war are usually Hollywood-type films, they kind of play up the action aspect of it. They're not really character driven. We thought it was the right time and the right subject matter."

Strong adds that he and Voerg were initially worried that people would think "Cigarette Soup" was pro-military propaganda or that they were trying to show one particular political point of view. "It's a character story entirely, and we wanted that to come across more than anything," he says.

Strong plans to show the film to more veterans, who have only given him positive feedback. "Vets say the dialogue is realistic, that that's the way soldiers talk," he says, crediting Craig Washington, the film's military technical adviser, with making the piece so truthful. "They also agree that being bored is the worst feeling that you can have in combat, and all soldiers want to do something. Obviously nobody wants to kill or be killed, but they want to feel like they're doing what they were sent there to do."

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A scene from the compelling action film, "Cigarette Soup," which explores the struggles American soldiers face while serving in combat.

Strong also recalls many veterans stating that the behavior of the actors as trained soldiers was very accurate. "We've been talking with Veterans Affairs because we came up with the idea of doing screenings at veterans' hospitals in the future."

The dynamic filmmaker is ready to get back to writing and directing. Next he'll be directing the feature "No Rhyme No Reason," which he describes as "a very unique story about a rapper who witnesses the murder of his prostitute mother at an early age, causing him to become a serial killer." He continues to develop the script with the writers, and hopes to shoot it next year.

For now, Strong is thrilled about having been a part of LIIFE, which he feels has cast a positive light on Long Island. "Long Island has grown in the spotlight because of the festival," he says. "There are so many people from all over the world that come to it. When I went out to L.A. people would say to me, 'Isn't that where Joey Buttafuoco is from?'" Strong shakes his head, chuckling. "I would wonder why they even remember Joey Buttafuoco! But I think a festival like this proves that we're so much more, and that we're capable of amazing things out here."

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