

## Portland Director Cambria Matlow on Mali's Attempt to Go Solar

By Brian Stimson  
Of *The Skanner News*

On Thursday, Dec. 17 the African Film Festival will host Portland-based director Cambria Matlow for a screening and Q & A of her documentary "Burning in the Sun" at 7:30 p.m. at the Moriarty Arts and Humanities Building at PCC Cascade. Like all films for PCC's African Film Festival, the screening is free.

"Burning in the Sun" is a documentary that tells the story of 26-year-old Daniel Dembele, who decides to return to his homeland of Mali in order to start a business building and selling solar panels. In a country where 99 percent of rural communities live without electricity, Daniel's idea could revolutionize the impoverished, sun-drenched country. With the help of Dr. Richard Komp, he struggles to get his ideas off the ground in order to provide affordable electricity to people who still rely on wood-burning stoves to survive.

Matlow spoke with *The Skanner News* about her film, the struggles of filmmaker and businessman and the perils of filming in Mali.

*The Skanner News:* What motivated you to pursue this story? If you really step back and look at this story, it looks like any story that happens all the time — someone creates a small business, innovates something, it happens all the time. Why this?

*Cambria Matlow:* I sort of got lucky, in that I was invited to Mali to be the filmmaker and film the events that were to transpire. I was in my first semester of film school when it happens. A friend of mine knew two of the main characters. She was a friend of Daniel Dembele who is the young man in the film and also knew Dr. Richard Komp who they brought to Mali and who trained Daniel in solar panel construction and all things solar. This person also knew me. She brought Daniel and Richard together. Daniel had expressed an interest in going back to



From "Burning in the Sun"

Mali in doing something sort of not only business oriented, but service oriented, in the line of his mother's work. Richard Komp has traveled all over the world helping people start solar businesses. Everyone had a desire to meet. Knowing I was a filmmaker, my friend said, "Hey this guy is building solar panels in his driveway in Mali, do you want to come film?" She'd been telling me of what she thought might happen. What had happened in projects like this before that Richard had taken on. Knowing the possibilities, solar energy is pretty revolutionary in the United States, let alone West Africa, where you don't hear a lot about technological innovations. I just was like, this sounds really, really fascinating and interesting and exciting, something that will never happen ever again. I should really jump on it, basically. It inspired me enough to decide to do the project.

*TSN:* What were some of the challenges that Daniel faced in trying to get his solar business off the ground?

*CM:* Definitely financial challenges, which he continues to face. At this point, there's a huge demand of panels that people build themselves. At the beginning of the project, having enough initial capital to get all the parts he needed and pay for the labor and costs. He had a lot support that was critical to (get the project going) Dr. Komp continues to travel back to Mali to check in and make sure everything is functioning properly and

Her film 'Burning in the Sun' Premieres at African Film Festival Feb. 10

relaying new things to do things and seeing what new things Daniel is doing. Things can go wrong very easily and also especially in the beginning there was a lot of trial and error, getting things to work exactly as they should. It was a matter of experience and practice. Daniel would say — we don't really talk about this a lot in the film — Daniel was worried about people abusing the notion of something that could be really good for people, and trying to make money for themselves without doing anything for anyone else — sort of stealing the idea of selling solar panels and taking advantage of poor people.

*TSN:* Has this fear come to fruition?

*CM:* It hasn't happened to him, but he feels it is something that happens frequently in the nonprofit world in Mali. I don't see any direct notion of it, but I was only there for so long. His mom worked in the nonprofit world for 30-some years and shared his sentiments — that you really had to protect ideas from people abusing them.

*TSN:* Does the film paint a positive picture of Mali being able to build a solar infrastructure?

*CM:* The film itself is very inspiring and hopeful. There's not a lot of editorial on the filmmakers' part. There's no outside narrator. What you get from it, is literally the story that is told, the events that transpire and the things that they have to say. While you'll see challenges that Daniel faces, things that people generally face, you'll also see the successes and achievements and things that change in a posi-

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itive direction. It's really an inspiring, positive film.

*TSN:* Did the film's positive subject matter affect how you marketed the film? Many of the films coming out of Africa deal with the continent's long-running wars or other problems, so did this film have a hard time finding an audience?

*CM:* The responses I've gotten from African and African Americans film communities, I'll say, and generally, the communities, is really strong and very immediately and easily identifying with the characters and situations, and they enjoy the film. I think it's a really important story and very large, globally relevant subject matter, but it's a very small story, in that we focus on a very contained story and specific characters. The reason we did that is that first and foremost we wanted to tell a good story. Not something depressing, in particular because you do see so many films

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