

Film explores concepts of justice

By Erica Smishek
of The Star-Phoenix

There are two sides to every street and two sides to every story.

Just ask Rosalie Bellefontaine, an independent video producer whose latest project, *North of West Gate*, is a 28-minute child-oriented fantasy set in one of Winnipeg's poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods.

"Outsiders have an image of that kind of neighborhood, of the crime, the violence," Bellefontaine said in an interview. "But when you live in the community, you see the other side. You get to know the people and understand the sense of honor, the sense of justice, the code of ethics."

North of West Gate pays tribute to the rundown but close-knit community along Langside, a street located just blocks away from Winnipeg's affluent neighborhood of West Gate as well as the place Bellefontaine called home for seven years before moving to Saskatoon last fall. The artist, who now works educating Saskatoon's street kids about AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, said the video was prompted by the shooting death of Native leader J.J. Harper, who was shot in 1988 during a scuffle with a police constable.

"It was a really tough summer. There was a lot of tension and a lot of racism. Everyone had been hearing negative stuff about Indians from the TV," said Bellefontaine, at the time a non-Native working as a community volunteer in a mostly Native community. "I wanted to do something positive for the kids."

Bellefontaine — a graduate of the Queen's University film department, an author of several short animated films and documentaries and a founding member of Winnipeg's Women Artists in Video (WAVI) — turned to a medium she knew and loved.

Mark and Emma Meekis, cousins of the late Harper, play leading roles in the fast-paced production. Their characters help other kids "get even" with a neighborhood bully who has mistreated a slightly mentally handicapped boy.

Designed to examine the children's sense of justice, the production evolved from an artistic venture into an educational one.

"We were not on TV or film-making time. It was a real process video," Bellefontaine said of the shoot, which was done on location during the summers of 1989 and 1990 and featured more than 60 children.

"As much as we could, we wanted to let the kids learn about issues, that video is a medium for them. There's so much video equipment in the workplace now. It's a good skill to have. It's pretty simple — and it's fun too."

Mark Meekis agrees, teasing Bellefontaine about her offer to buy the chil-



Rosalie Bellefontaine directs Mark Meekis in *North of West Gate*.

—S-P photo by Richard Marjon

dren flavored ice treats after a particularly difficult shoot that forced them to spend hours in a wading pool. "We were freezing and then she wanted to give us freezes." The reserved 13-year-old said

with a grin.

Funded by Bellefontaine as well as the Manitoba Arts Council, Canada Council and the Cultural Industries Development Office (CIDO), North of

West Gate premiered last month at a Winnipeg community centre. Bellefontaine hopes to distribute the video through educational programmers and independent outlets.