



WHAT'S WORKING

A Message From DJJ Director Andy Block

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Screen Sessions

DJJ's Dahsheen Amin Writes, Produces Films To Deliver Power-Packed Therapy

The first few years after she joined DJJ in 2000 as a mental health therapist, Dahsheen Amin heard story after heartbreaking story from the residents she was dealing with at Beaumont and Bon Air JCCs. She knew that other young people who were flirting with serious trouble could learn from their experiences, but she fretted about how to most effectively tell them without violating confidences.

Then, in 2004, Dahsheen lost a favorite cousin to drugs, a tragic ending to the same downward spiral she had seen time and again in the youth she was working with. Wanting to do something – anything – to reach out, she started writing about her experiences, not knowing how, or if, her words would ever matter.

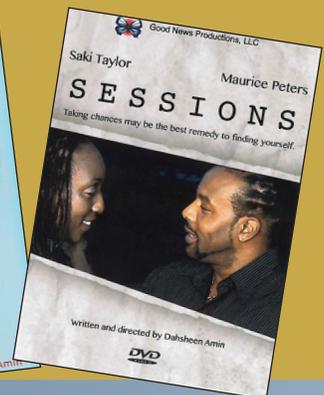
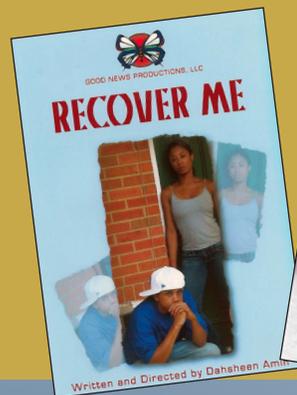
She started talking to two other cousins who had recently graduated with degrees in filmmaking. That's when the idea finally struck: The movies. That was the one most powerful thing she could think of that young people really paid attention to. She decided right then that she would make movies out of the stories she had heard.

Trouble was, aside from taking a few home videos here and there, Dahsheen knew nothing about how to make a professionally-produced movie. But convinced she had found the teaching tool she had long sought, she immersed herself for the next 10 months in the world of cinema. She read, studied and researched how to operate a good camera, what makes a good shot, how best to light a scene, apply movie makeup, cast actors, and finance a film.

By the time she arranged for some financial partners and bought her first camera, she was ready to begin production on her first film. She founded her company, Good News Productions, in 2007, wrote a screenplay based on her late cousin's experience along with several



"When you love something, it's not hard to fit in everything you want to do," says DJJ Mental Health Therapist Dahsheen Amin in describing how she balances her responsibilities at DJJ with making full-length feature films that she writes and directs. Above, she displays a poster advertising her latest movie, "Temp," which is about human trafficking. Below, her first two movies: "Recover Me" and "Sessions."





Above: "Temp" co-stars David Leehy and Mike Shiflett await direction from Dabsheen Amin. Left: Actors Jemar O'Neal Harris, Dominga Murray and Bon Air Sgt. Michelle Coakley in scenes from "Temp."

others, and began work on "Recover Me," a story about a "single mother's misguided quest for love and happiness that soon catapults her into a twisted love triangle of addiction," according to the film's description.

"It took about a year to make," Dabsheen says. "It's all I did on my weekends and time off. The filming portion took about two weeks, which we did during my vacation."

She was able to get the finished film screened in Connecticut, Los Angeles and New York to see how it would be accepted. She made sure that at-risk youth and single mothers as well as church groups and other youth organizations were invited. In 2009, she entered it in the Virginia Independent Film Festival, where it won the Audience Choice Award. In 2010, "Recover Me" went public on DVD and has done well in sales, Dabsheen reports.

While others have told her that she might improve sales by making some scenes sexier or more violent, Dabsheen refuses to include gratuitous scenes unless they are an integral part of the story. "While my films are meant to entertain, my main goal is to generate positive energy toward social change," she says. "And that's what I've been seeing."

Since the completion of "Recover Me," Dabsheen

has completed two more films: "Sessions," a romantic comedy which illustrates some of the challenging yet humorous events in the life of a therapist, and the just-completed "Temp," a look at the increasingly prevalent instances of human trafficking, in which her daughter played the lead role. The film was premiered Jan. 16 at the Bow Tie Cinemas in Richmond in front of a standing-room only audience.

She makes a point of sharing her finished films with all the DJJ residents she talks to. "The films get their immediate respect, not only because they know I made it, but because they often see footage of the actual neighborhoods where they grew up, and sometimes they'll even see someone they know in it. It pulls it all together for them, and creates a great connection with the kids to begin great, constructive conversations."

Dabsheen is now in her 16th year as a DJJ mental health therapist, but all that experience is just giving her more ideas: she is writing screenplays for a thriller entitled "The Spider," "The Misinterpretation of Me," and "Transfer," which will delve into the world of science fiction and terminal illness.

"When you love something, it's not hard to fit in everything you want to do," she says.