

## ISLAND

## Controversial Wal-Mart film coming to P.E.I.

Teresa Wright Constable

*Constable is a student of the Journalism program at Holland College*

In May 2005, a jaundiced beast broke loose from a minivan full of yellow smiley-face balloons in Summerside's Wal-Mart parking lot.

A carnival barker nearby warned shoppers of the beast's escape, listing crimes the creature had committed against communities.

Shoppers stopped to watch. Eventually, some youths captured the beast and put him back in the van. They were trying to keep the Beast of Bentonville from running across Canada.

The beast was a student activist in makeup and the incident was staged for a documentary called *Wal-Town The Film*.

Launched by Montreal-based überculture in 2004, this National Film Board movie documents a group of students from Concordia University who traveled across Canada in 2004 and 2005 campaigning against Wal-Mart.

The scene in Summerside is one of many in the film in which six students, two camera men, a director and a freelance journalist talk to people across the country about the damage they feel Wal-Mart has been done to smaller Canadian communities.

The group is taking *Wal-Town The Film* on a cross-Canada tour. It stopped in Summerside and Charlottetown Jan. 28 and 29.

Leo Cheverie, who helped bring the film to P.E.I., said its focus on downtown areas in Canada is relevant to P.E.I.'s waning downtown cores.

"(Wal-Mart) hurts local retailers because it promises low prices, but there's a very high cost to those low prices in terms of the cost to the community."

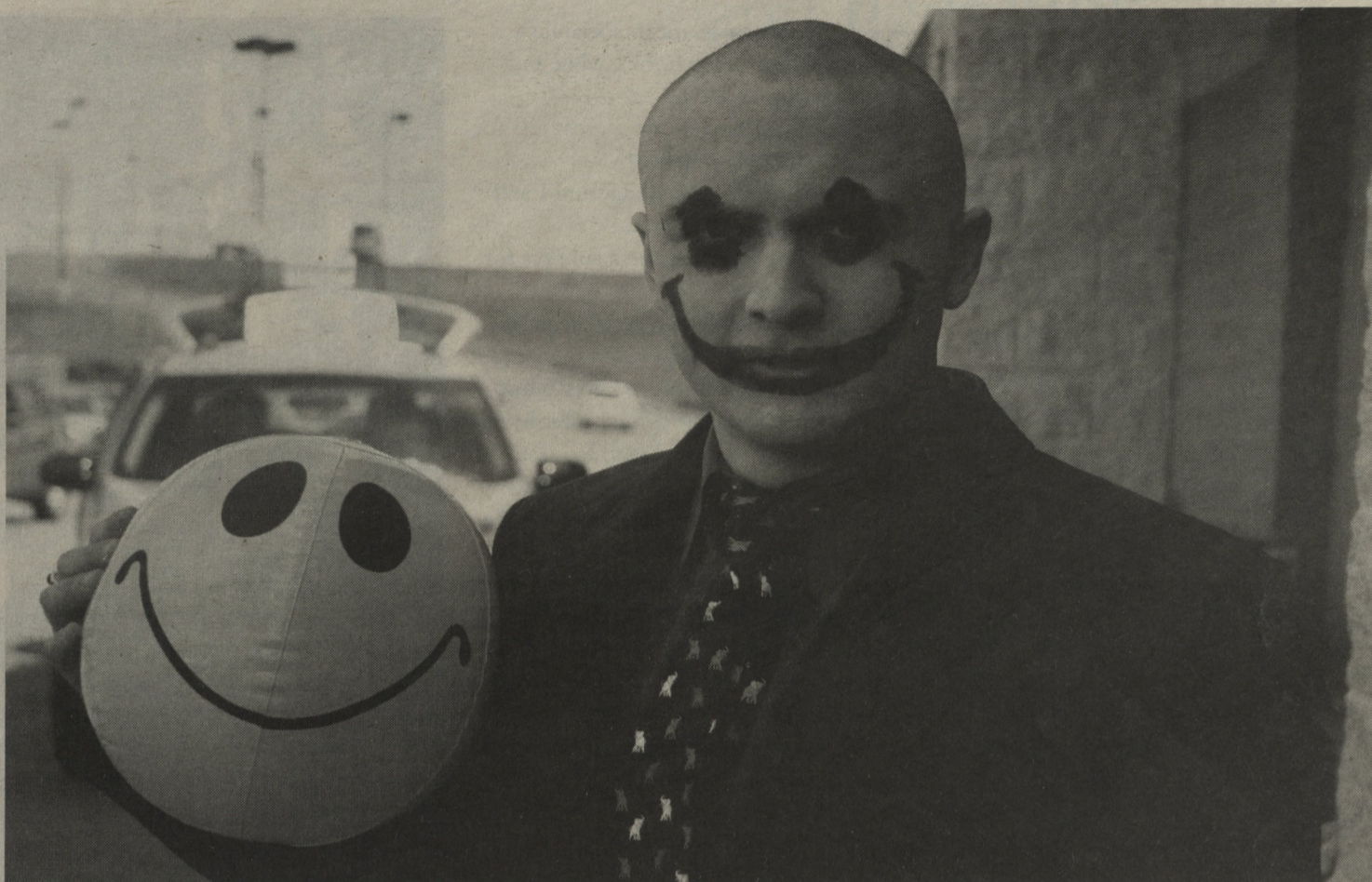
Cheverie said locally owned and smaller businesses are hurting as retail dollars leave the province when people spend their money at large box retailers like Wal-Mart.

Parking in Wal-Mart lots, the students handed out flyers, organized demonstrations like the one in Summerside, and talked to shoppers and local residents about the corporation.

Tim McSorley is one of the students in the film. He was surprised by the contrast he noticed between communities with a Wal-Mart store and those without.

"In communities that we went to that didn't have a Wal-Mart, they still had a very vibrant downtown with lots of people walking around and lots of community-run stores and merchants."

But in many communities with a Wal-Mart nearby, local stores had started closing and their downtowns changed drastically, McSorley said.



*Wal-Town activist Rob Maguire dressed as the Beast of Bentonville outside the Wal-Mart in Summerside, May, 2005.*

**Constable photo**

"Instead of going to the downtown core, (shoppers) were starting to go to the outreaches of town where the Wal-Mart was located. It changed the appearance of the community."

In one scene, the students chat with a local retailer in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario who points out two or three well-established local businesses he thinks were forced to close when Wal-Mart came to town.

"We constantly saw that every community, whether it's big or small, out West or out East, people were dealing with the same issues and facing the same struggles," McSorley said.

## Film unfair attack on firm: Wal-Mart

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Attacking Wal-Mart is a disservice to the million Canadians who shop there every day, to the 70,000 who work for Wal-Mart, and to the truth, says Wal-Mart Canada in response to *Wal-Town The Film*.

Kevin Groh, director of corporate affairs for Wal-Mart's Canadian headquarters, said he is concerned many of the activists' claims in the movie were presented as fact.

"It's one thing to support the group's freedom of speech, but we can't support their use of misinformation."

The film is slanted because the initial tour and the film were funded in part by the United Food and Commercial Workers Canada (UFCW), he said.

"It's telling that this group has been supported by a union whose No. 1 objective is to criticize or unionize Wal-Mart."

He cited a scene shot in front of the Wal-Mart in Jonquiere, Quebec – where the store eventually closed after a highly publicized debate over unionization.

A woman going into the Jonquiere Wal-Mart was approached by the *Wal-Town* group.

"If the store's asking for a union, I believe it's because they need it," she said. Groh said the store's employees voted against unionization.

"The union demonstrated it was unwilling to take no for an answer when our associates voted not to unionize the Jonquiere store – the UFCW essentially forced a union on our associates in Jonquiere."

Groh also criticized a scene where a group of Jonquiere Walmart associates burn their Wal-Mart vests. There was no mention about this being a "UFCW arranged photo op."

Groh said the documentary does a fairly balanced job of showing Canadians and those who work for the company are largely pro-Wal-Mart.

"You can look at it in two ways – as a tale of union-funded student activists failing to convince Canadians that Wal-Mart is bad. And you can look at it as a really misinformed effort to talk about Wal-Mart as an entity."

Tim McSorley, one of the students in the

film, said his group got mixed receptions from employees and shoppers. They even had a few run-ins with the law. While handing out flyers by the Wal-Mart in St. John's, NFLD, the police put the group into the back of their squad car.

"You know we have to do our job and ask you to leave," the officer told them. But it didn't deter them, McSorley said. "Even in the cases where the police did come, it wasn't until about 45 minutes after we'd got there, so it was enough time to talk to some customers and employees."

Whether people agree or disagree with the film's message, McSorley hopes to inspire consumers to take on a more active role in their consumption habits.

"People are always trying to make their dollars go a little bit further, but every once and awhile we all find ourselves in a situation where we have that extra bit of money in our pocket and can afford to pay a little bit more for something, "We know that money is going to be reinvested back into the community – so to think of that before going to places like Wal-Mart."