

LOVE OVER HATE

Now airing on Alaska Beyond Entertainment: *Big Sonia*

By Jacob Utti

» **Talking about the Holocaust** is difficult, especially if you've lived through it. Yet, that's precisely what 92-year-old survivor Sonia Warshawski does every day. She talks with people about the details of her time in concentration camps and being freed. It's one of the many remarkable aspects of her vibrant daily life, which includes running a small tailor shop in Kansas City, Kansas, and, more recently, advocating her message of "love over hate" to the U.S. Congress.

It was seven years ago that Sonia's granddaughter, Seattle-based filmmaker Leah Warshawski, began making a movie about Sonia's life. "At that time," Leah recalls, "we wanted to make a short film about a little old lady in this tailor shop in the bottom of a failing mall." Time was ticking, Leah notes, and she wanted to document her grandmother's story before it was too late. But it was during one of the first days of filming that Leah realized *Big Sonia* was meant for bigger things than the short documentary Leah had envisioned.

One morning, speaking with 13- and 14-year-old middle school students, Sonia shared her story in honest detail. She described beatings she endured from guards, and she recounted the traumatic day she watched as her mother walked to the gas chamber. Nevertheless, Sonia told the students, she holds no hatred for the people responsible. Instead, she chooses a life filled with love.

"The kids broke down that day," Leah says. "Sonia made them think about their own families. Kids in different cliques were willing to be vulnerable with each other and talk about some really hard stuff."

It was her message of "love over hate" that Sonia took to prisons to share with inmates and later to the halls of Congress itself. In April,

on the 73rd anniversary of Sonia's liberation from the camp, Leah and Sonia attended a screening of *Big Sonia* with members of the Senate and House of Representatives.

"We had a bipartisan turnout," remembers Leah. "Sonia got to stand up in front of members of Congress and talk about her message, which is as important today as ever."

Beth Barrett, artistic director for the Seattle International Film Festival, also believes Sonia's message should be shared with audiences of all ages. As part of a new initiative between SIFF and Alaska Airlines to highlight locally made independent films, Barrett chose to feature *Big Sonia* on SIFF's onboard movie channel. "*Big Sonia* is such a moving film," Barrett says. "Many people may not have access to a film like it or to a festival like SIFF. Now they can see these movies by just getting on a plane."

SIFF, which showcases films from around

» **Sonia Warshawski is a tailor and activist, and the subject of a documentary about a caring soul.**

the world, is one of the largest festivals of its kind in the United States. And the organization has worked with Alaska Airlines for more than 40 years to present the annual three-week event. Recently, that partnership has grown.

"We thought we should be present in more places than just Seattle," explains Barrett. "And to know that the hometown film festival has the support of the hometown airline is so valuable. It's gratifying to be able to introduce people from around the world to the talent in Seattle."

Look for *Big Sonia* and a selection of other SIFF-presented films and shorts on Alaska Beyond Entertainment this month. Simply connect to the onboard Wi-Fi network and go to AlaskaWiFi.com to get started. ✈

