



Submitted Photo

An image taken from the documentary *Cover Girl Culture* shows an ad approved by Teen Vogue that captures a young girl in a highly suggestive sexual situation. It is just one of the images former Elite International model Nicole Clark tackles at a special showing of her movie at the first annual Zonta Club Film Festival starting Nov.23.

Cover Girl Culture

Documentary on unrealistic body image part of first annual Zonta Club Film Festival

By Bob Vrbanac, Chronicle Staff

Women have always been bombarded with images about body type, diet and how the latest fashion could change their lives, but those messages are becoming more pervasive, reaching them online and on their smart phones.

It's getting harder to tune it out as advertising continues its assault on healthy body image in a high-tech world where women find themselves even more connected to the message that they're not good enough unless they have the latest look.

That spurred former Elite International model Nicole Clark into exploring the world of fashion, modeling, advertising and the impact of celebrity culture on teens and young women. The Canadian expatriate and University of Guelph alumna used her insider status to get unprecedented access to the image makers and social "trenders" and put together a film called *Cover Girl Culture: Awakening the Media Generation*.

The documentary will open the Zonta Club of Kitchener-Waterloo's first-ever film festival tonight at the Princess Twin Cinema in uptown Waterloo. The local women's service club, working to advance the status of women, will be hosting two screenings of the film followed by a reception and a chance to discuss the film with Clark.

Clark, who grew up near Sarnia, said she fell into the world of modeling by accident. What started out as a summer job, helping to put her through school, turned into a four-year journey in fashion.

"I wasn't interested in pursuing it as a career," said Clark. "I actually didn't want to be a model, and I was kind of embarrassed that I had taken on the role.

"I realized while I was modeling that I was part of the problem and I had complained about the pressure it created when I was in high school. I was selling illusions and promises."

It was the 1980s and the dawn of the super models — women who were being paid millions of dollars to walk the fashion catwalks. It was also the age of anorexia and bulimia, when the unhealthy body image fostered by the fashion industry, led to major public health concerns.

Clark said it was bad enough to try to fight off those media messages when there were only five channels being beamed in on her family's television. It's worse now in a 500-channel universe where even turning off the TV can't help you escape from that constant bombardment as the Internet and smart phones find young girls and teens struggling to swim against the current of constant information flow.

"It's in the cellphones that the kids carry around with them everyday," said Clark. "It's every advertiser's dream come true to have kids with Internet access on their phones.

"It's even harder to get away from it now."

Clark was living in Florida with her husband and had become a children's author, penning books on emotional intelligence when she decided she had to do more to stem the information overload.

"I had moved to California and was working with a documentary filmmaker at the time when he discovered that I modeled," said Clark. "He kept asking about the industry and I told him I was trying to forget it.

"He kept asking me to do a film on it, and I said 'No, no, no. I don't want to touch it with a 10-foot pole.'"

But the idea intrigued her and she was able to secure interviews with people in the fashion industry who she thought she'd never get, including the editors of Elle and Teen Vogue magazine.

"It was a film that was waiting to happen," said Clark. "And it surprised me about how easy it was to get some of these interviews."

Like every documentarian, Clark found that the film took on a life of its own and took her to places she wasn't expecting to go.

"It started to look at how all media affects young girls and women in general," said Clark. "It became a broader topic than just what the modeling world is all about.

"The end product is really teaching media literacy to girls and giving them a critical eye to see how advertising, Hollywood, Reality TV and the media is affecting them and offers them some solutions."

Clark's goal to create Clever Girl Culture instead of Cover Girl Culture has led to appearances on CNN, the Joy Behar Show and most recently CTV's Canada AM. She continues her work and is working on new projects that help highlight the struggle while speaking to students in the U.S. and Canada.

"In a second documentary I'm doing right now, I ask girls whether they would rather be smart or pretty?" said Clark. "Immediately they say pretty, because they can marry someone smart and have their money.

"That's really sad to hear."

Clark's is just one of three documentaries that will be screened during the two-day festival that wraps up Nov. 24 with two films focusing on women in Africa.

Documentarian Nancy Durrell McKenna will be on hand to discuss her films *Who Cares About Her* and *Safehands for Mothers* that looks at the struggles of young women in Africa trying to get access to reproductive health supports.

Tickets are available at www.kwzontafilmfestival.com, and must be purchased in advance. Proceeds from the festival go to support local women's charities, and organizers are hoping to make it an annual event.

"I am thrilled with the response we have had to a film festival that is about advocating for women here and in other parts of the world," said co-organizer Nancy Croth. "These films are written and directed by women on behalf of women worldwide.

"In places like Africa, in many cases it is about basic human rights and dignity. Here in North America, it is about reclaiming the right to be what and who we really are, not what the fashion industry says we should be.

"It is a message people need and want to hear and they want to know how they can make a difference in people's lives. This is the first year for the festival and we plan on making it an annual event."