

# REEL CHICAGO

BARBARA ROCHE'S

## FILM

### Chicago teen filmmaker Aeris Danet becomes youngest winner in CHFF history

By Reel Chicago May 30, 2025



In a genre built on unexpected twists, no one at the 2025 **Chicago Horror Film Festival (CHFF)** was expecting the breakout star of the weekend to be a 15-year-old from Orland Park, Illinois. But **Aeris Danet** isn't just any teen. With her debut short *Nebulous*, she became the youngest filmmaker in CHFF history to receive an official selection, earn two nominations, and win Best Horror First-Time Director

— all in one weekend.

Held May 16–18 at the historic **Logan Theatre**, CHFF drew 223 horror films from around the world, making Aeris's win even more extraordinary. The festival has long been considered one of the premiere showcases for indie horror, and Danet didn't just hold her own—she stood out.

*Nebulous*, a 10-minute slasher homage filled with clever horror tropes and heartfelt coming-of-age tension, tells the story of high school teens making a student film — until real horror takes over. Danet wrote, directed, produced, edited, and starred in the film, which fuses *80s slasher energy* with *90s teen angst*, underscored by a soundtrack featuring Bad Boy Bill, Shock Stars, and Bottle of Justus. Take a look at the trailer below:



"I wrote the script two days before my birthday," says **Danet**. "Signed my SAG Micro Budget Agreement on my birthday. Started shooting two weeks later. And yeah — I used two iPhones, a Tiffen Steadicam, cordless mics, my MacBook, and Adobe Premiere Pro. That was the gear."

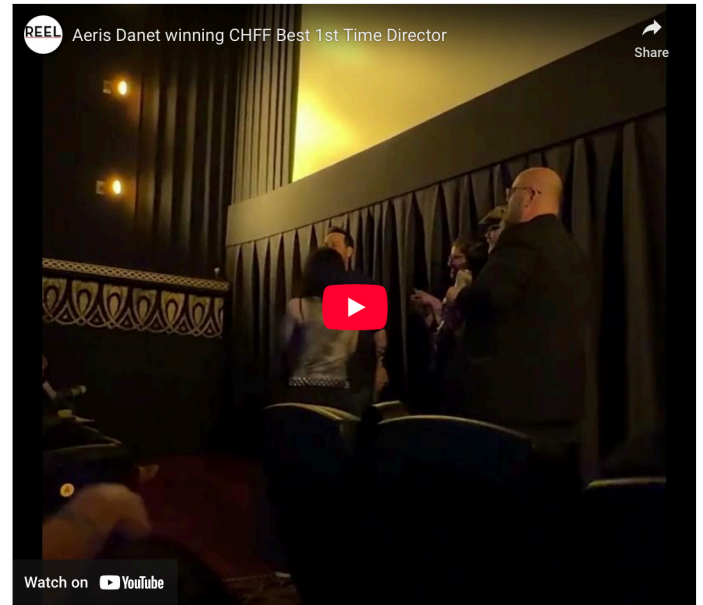
Danet, a SAG-AFTRA member and part of the **Independent Film Alliance of Chicago**, pulled from her theater and on-set experience to cast local classmates, cousins, and mentors — including her acting coach **Heidi Marshall** and her husband **Johnny Sanchez**, whom her classmates still refer to as "the clown from *Transformers*."

Despite her age, Danet didn't just win over the CHFF judges — she floored them.

**Chris Vecchio**, CHFF promoter, told the *Chicago Tribune*: "We go by directing, story, editing, cinematography. It's basically the 'mini Oscars' — the Oscars for horror. I started when I was 50 and I'm 57, and just watching her film — it kind of blew me away."

**Steve Desmond**, co-writer of *Knock at the Cabin*, reviewed the short and added: "I'm honestly very impressed, especially given Aeris's age and this being her first film. She has a lot of innate talent in shot composition, editing, pacing, and rhythm."

Danet says the most surreal moment wasn't winning — it was sitting in the Logan Theater, watching an audience *react* to her work in real time.



"I wrote *Nebulous* for myself, to prove I could do it," she said. "But hearing people laugh where I hoped they would, gasp at the kills—it was like, wow. They get it. That's everything."

Even more remarkable? CHFF selected *Nebulous* on merit—before realizing its creator was a teen.

"When I asked if I was the youngest selected, they said yes—and they had no idea I was 15 when they picked it," she explains. "That's what makes me proud. They picked the film for the film."

Danet is already developing *Nebulous* into a feature. "There's so much more story to tell," she says. "I know where it's going, and I want to work with people who trust my vision. I'm just getting started."

From a suburban high school to a packed house at one of horror's most respected fests, Aeris Danet's story is not just a win for teen filmmakers — it's a win for Chicago. And horror fans everywhere should be paying attention.

Congrats from *Reel Chicago*, Aeris.

