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MOVIEGOERS

A Call to Action- 'Letters to Ashleigh'

BY MACK BATES

This past May, Moviegoers' staff blogger Mack Bates wrote about the crowdfunding campaign via Indiegogo waged by Milwaukee Summer Entertainment Camp founder Kyle Olson, a South Milwaukee native and award-winning filmmaker, and the family of Ashleigh Love (a local teenage girl whose still-unsolved murder made headlines in the fall of 2009), to film a proposed anti-violence documentary with the working title Letters to Ashleigh. In the film, family members, friends, and strangers would read letters (to Ashleigh) that they had written to her following her death.

The goal was to raise at least \$3,000 of the film's proposed \$3,500 production budget by the end of its Indiegogo campaign in order to move forward with the documentary.

In a recent conversation with Kyle Olson, who resides in southern California and works primarily behind-the-scenes in TV production, he spoke of what prompted him to want to attempt to make Letters to Ashleigh in the first place:

"I've been a friend of the Love family for years. Anthony (Ashleigh's older brother) has been my best friend since middle school. When this senseless tragedy happened, I wanted to do something that would help everyone affected [by it]. Film is a universal language. Many people use film to entertain, but I also think film should be used as a way to communicate thoughts, feelings, and ideas with an audience. I wanted to make sure the family knew that Ashleigh's death, while tragic and sad, has inspired people to do some truly incredible things in our community."

Olson, who's currently hard at work on the current season of ABC's "Dancing With the Stars," says the crowdfunding campaign for *Letters to Ashleigh* was a success and that principal photography on the feature-length documentary has already been completed. The film raised a total of \$4,622 during its month-long Indiegogo campaign (over \$1,100 more than its proposed \$3,500 production budget) and is currently in post-production.

Earlier this year, Olson joined forces with the Love family in order to make this long-gestating passion project of his – and theirs – a reality. “This documentary is not about why this happened, or how it shouldn’t have happened,” he says. “I think we all can agree that this murder should not have happened. *Letters to Ashleigh* is a film about a family who was hit with an unimaginable tragedy, but still found a way to wake up every morning and take on life with all their heads held high. Audiences will be able to see how the Love family comes to know that Ashleigh’s death was not in vein. There have been a number of wonderful things that have happened – in her honor – since she was taken from us four years ago.”

For those unfamiliar with the particulars of the story, Ashleigh Anne Love, a graduate of Pius XI High School, was fatally shot by an assailant inside her family’s home in the early hours of Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2009. She was just 19 years old. The culprit is still at-large, and her murder has been classified a cold case. She is survived by her parents, two brothers, as well as additional family and friends.

In August, Olson flew back home to Milwaukee to film the documentary over a tight, three-day schedule. “I’m happy to say that everything went according to plan during filming,” he says. “We actually managed to stay ahead of schedule the entire weekend. That was a major advantage of working with a great crew.”

He pointed out that the majority of the seven-man crew (technically, three men and four women) got their start in Wisconsin, but now live and work out-of-state – like him. “For this project, I was lucky that they were all able to come back to Milwaukee to work on the documentary because they believed so much in what we’re trying to do,” he says. “It’s nice to have people working with me that I can trust and whose work will not only tell the story but will also enhance the story.”

Two members of the crew – production assistants Melissa Harvancik and Valerie Lighthart – are award-winning alumni from Olson’s Milwaukee Summer Entertainment Camp.

Marcus Taplin, the documentary’s director of photography, says of working on the project: “I worked closely with Kyle to achieve the look of the film from a photography and lighting standpoint. He’s big on prep work. Preproduction lasted for a few months before we shot a single frame. Having all that lead time to prepare before filming got underway was extremely helpful in figuring out how we wanted to frame the film. This is an emotional piece, so the better prepared we were going into it the better.”

Olson was keenly aware that when it came time to film the letter reading segments (which will be prominently featured throughout *Letters to Ashleigh*) that great care would have to be taken in order to make the process as smooth as possible for the participants. “From the very beginning, I knew that this was going to be a very tricky endeavor to film because of the sensitive nature of the project. In this documentary, we are watching real people read real letters that they wrote to Ashleigh after her death.”

A few participants got cold feet in the days leading up to the start of principal photography and reached out to him to express their concerns. “I told them I understood why they were afraid,” he says. “I know that the bright lights and cameras can be intimidating, especially when dealing with a sensitive topic. But I reminded them that this project is being done for Ashleigh – and for her family. Most people understood that this is a story that needed to be told and that they were a key piece of the puzzle in being able to tell it. In the end, everybody who said they would film with us kept their word.”

Extra time was purposefully factored into the production schedule to give the participants reading letters some “relaxing time” before they filmed, as Olson described it. “We also made sure to buy a lot of tissue, since we knew there would be a lot of tears flowing....not just on screen, but behind the scenes as well.”

Tammy Love, Ashleigh’s mother, whose diligence proved instrumental in getting the film made, knew making the film would be emotionally taxing, but was elated when she got word that the film had gotten the go-ahead. “It was an a-ha moment for sure,” she says. “Like ‘Oh my God! This is really going to happen. We’re doing it.’ Everybody just came together to make it happen. People who had either kind of forgotten about what happened or put it on the backburner just came forward and helped. Now that it’s done, I can sit back and sigh.”

Olson calls *Letters to Ashleigh*, “a call to action,” as does the film’s production coordinator, Kelly Dean. “My hope is that the community will come together to end violence,” Dean says. “We are stronger in numbers, and the more awareness the community has of that the better.”

Crew member Buzz Meade (who served as the documentary’s 2nd unit cameraman/videographer) thinks it’s great that *Letters to Ashleigh* will afford the public a rare, behind-the-scenes look at a brave family picking up the pieces following a tragedy. “So many times, all we get is a 30-second story on the news and there’s no time to go into the whole story of who people are and how they are coping a week, a month, or a year after a tragedy.”

His sentiments were echoed by production assistant Laura West, whose work on the film has opened her eyes to the fact that people have become “desensitized” to media reports of violent crimes thanks to the seemingly non-stop coverage of them on the nightly news.

Working on the project has inspired production assistant Melissa Harvancik to pay it forward: “After filming, I promised that every act of kindness I commit will be in honor of Ashleigh,” she says. “I hope this film is seen by as many people as possible and that it inspires others, as well.”

And Valerie Lighthart, who also worked as a production assistant on the film, shared that she hopes the documentary brings healing to the family and to anyone dealing with a loss.

Olson believes that Ashleigh’s story is universal and needs to make the rounds.

“Once post-production is complete, we are hoping someone might be willing to help us out or partner us with their organization so we can share this film with as many people in the community as possible,” he says. “This isn’t just a movie, it’s a movement, as well.

“From there, we are also talking about submitting this film to local festivals. I’ve also been in touch with some local grief organizations about using this for families who find themselves victims of tragedies. I am really open to where this can go. I want as many people to see it as possible, because I believe it can touch everybody in different ways.”

And what is Tammy Love’s hope for the film? “My hope is that by continuing to share Ashleigh’s story, it helps other people know that even when you’re in your darkest moment and you think that you can’t get up, that you can,” she says. “You can find hope, and you can keep going, and along the way end up inspiring other people to do the same. I also hope that it lets people know that no matter how bad it is, you don’t have to go through it alone. That there are people you can lean on. This film can make a difference. It will make a difference.”