

Milwaukee

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MOVIEGOERS

A Tangible Reality- “Letters to Ashleigh”

BY MACK BATES

Determined to make sure Ashleigh was remembered as more than just a murder statistic, South Milwaukee native and award-winning filmmaker Kyle Olson, a close family friend of the Loves, teamed up with the family to chronicle Ashleigh’s life. The resulting film, **Letters to Ashleigh**, gives audiences a glimpse at a family that has been hit with an unimaginable tragedy but still found a way to persevere with their heads held high.

A touching and quietly powerful celebration of Ashleigh’s all-too-short life, the documentary short features the family reading correspondence they received in the days and weeks following Ashleigh’s death, first from close family and friends, and then total strangers from around the country who heard about the story. The film also serves as a sobering wake-up call for those of us who have become increasingly desensitized to the seemingly never-ending deluge of media coverage detailing the latest senseless violent act(s) that typically kick off the nightly news even when it involves young, innocent victims caught in the crossfire. Rightly or wrongly, the same cannot be said for those who have lost a loved one to a senseless act of violence, like the Love family. One can’t help but think that each new media report of a senseless act of violence must feel like salt on a wound that will never fully heal.

In a recent conversation with Moviegoers, Kyle Olson, who resides in southern California and works extensively behind-the-scenes in TV production (his credits include the CW’s “America’s Next Top Model,” ABC’s “Dancing With the Stars,” Fox’s “Glee,” Syfy’s “Face Off”) spoke about making **Letters to Ashleigh** a reality.

For those unfamiliar with the particulars of the story, in the early morning hours of Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2009, an intruder broke into the Milwaukee-area home of then-recent high school graduate Ashleigh Anne Love, walked to her bedroom, and fatally shot her as she slept peacefully. Ashleigh had just celebrated her 19th birthday three weeks prior. She is survived by her parents, her two brothers, as well as a host of additional family and friends. The motive behind her murder remains a mystery as does the identity and whereabouts of the perpetrator. Ashleigh’s murder has been classified a cold case by the Milwaukee Police Department.

According to Olson, a lot of effort was put in by all involved before filming commenced in Milwaukee last August. “Prep work started well before we launched the Indiegogo campaign for **Letters to Ashleigh**,” Olson said. “Pre-production lasted about eight months before we moved into principal photography which lasted about a month. We filmed at various locations throughout Milwaukee because it’s where Ashleigh grew up and where most of her family and friends live.”

Olson has been actively working on the film for the better part of two years now. The film’s post-production work was done entirely in Hollywood and took nearly a year to complete.

Essentially films are made in the editing room, this especially holds true for documentary films, regardless of their length. Olson and his crew shot over 30 hours of footage for the film last summer. The finished film runs a little over 23 minutes. For a film with such a relatively brief running time, it packs quite the emotional wallop.

When asked to explain the close working relationship a filmmaker has with their editor when crafting a documentary, Olson said, “The editor is, in my opinion, one of ‘the’ most important people on a production. Next to the director, they have direct control of story. Elliott, our ace editor, worked tirelessly to make sure the entire film had the same look and feel we were dreaming of since Day 1 when we started pre-production. I value his feedback so much and it was so great having him on our team.”

He continued: “When you film a documentary, it’s paramount to have a ‘fresh set of eyes’ to check out the footage after it’s been shot. I worked with this story, the concepts, and everything else for almost a year before we shot it — so I became very comfortable and familiar with it. After we shot it, Elliott came in with a whole new set of eyes. That proved to be vitally important.”

Similarly, he had nothing but the utmost praise for everyone involved in the making of the film. “My crew for ***Letters to Ashleigh*** was the best. We had people from all over the United States working on this project. It was an incredible collaboration, a true team effort. I could not have asked for a better crew.”

Well into the editing process, as the documentary began to take shape, Olson selectively showed footage to trusted friends and colleagues to gauge their response to the material.

“It was important to me that we brought in folks from all walks of life so we could get as many diverse opinions as possible. We had a great grab bag of people including men and women of all ages from all different backgrounds. Twenty were asked to be a part of the screenings in total. The general consensus was that most people were really glad they had a chance to see the movie and learn about Ashleigh’s story. Most were moved in some way — many to tears.”

According to Olson, members of the Love family have opted to wait to see the film for the first time at next week’s “Red Carpet Premiere.”

When we last spoke, Olson mentioned that he was on the lookout for a business or an organization to help sponsor the film. He got what he was looking for and then some.

“We are thrilled to be partnering with [Cedar Lodge Music](#) for our sneak peek premiere event,” Olson shared. “Jim Shoulak, the man behind Cedar Lodge Music, has been a singer, songwriter, and guitar player for 37 years. His latest album, “Stayin’ Focused,” contains many social justice-themed songs, including selections about: domestic violence, peace, child sex abuse, same-sex relationships, politicians, and non-violence. It is Jim’s hope that through his publishing company, Cedar Lodge Music, he can call attention to injustice and oppression throughout the world, and work toward a more peaceful world. We could not have asked for a better partnership for this premiere. It’s a perfect fit. We are both in this for the same thing — sharing stories and hoping to make a change.”

Olson said that he’s already submitted the film to over a dozen film festivals, including several here in Wisconsin, in an attempt to get the film seen by as many people as possible. It’s his and the Love family’s hope that the film will not only draw attention back to Ashleigh’s case — but, fingers crossed — help bring about some long overdue justice for Ashleigh and her loved ones.

“I am hoping people will walk away from this film inspired to do something,” Olson says. “Everybody can do something to make a change. It sounds cliché, but it’s so true.”

Trials and tribulations are a part of everybody's life. Some people, of course, end up having to deal with far more than anyone would ever want to imagine. But at the end of the day, it's how one chooses to let those bad days shape them that makes all the difference.

"I hope Ashleigh's story inspires people to live their lives to the fullest and to always walk with their head held high — no matter what," Olson said. "This film has a universal message. Ashleigh's story is **our** story."