

In Movies & TV



The Love family and their murdered daughter Ashleigh are the subjects of the new documentary "Letters to Ashleigh."

## Documentary "Letters to Ashleigh" finds hope and peace in local tragedy

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On the morning of Oct. 6, 2009, Ashleigh Love, a 19-year-old recent graduate from Pius XI High School, was sleeping in her bed when an intruder broke into her home, went into her room and shot her to death.

Almost five years after the utterly senseless tragedy, Ashleigh's story – once front page news in Milwaukee – has faded into memory for most, quickly replaced on the news circuit by newer tragedies despite the fact that a perpetrator has still yet to be brought to justice. For filmmaker Kyle Olson, however, the story is very much still alive.

"You might remember the name, and you might vaguely remember the picture, but then it goes away," Olson said. "That's just the joy of living in the world of a 24-hour news cycle. But at the same time, there's a story beyond what the news pushes out there for that one or two weeks immediately after. That's what really intrigued me more than anything: This is a story about where the news left off. When the news crews pack up their equipment and go away, there's still a story unfolding."

Olson – a Milwaukee native now living in Los Angeles, as well as a friend of Ashleigh's older brother Anthony since middle school – followed the case from afar until he decided to come back home last summer and help share the Love family's story. The one he ended up finding is not entirely of tragedy and darkness, but instead of hope and community.

"The inspiration that comes from this family is unlike anything that I've ever been able to experience firsthand," Olson said. "This family has been through hell and back with what happened to Ashleigh, yet they have the perseverance and the will and the strength to get up and to live another day and to fight and to bring the cowards that murdered Ashleigh to justice."

That story comes together in Olson's new documentary "Letters to Ashleigh," which is making its premiere Saturday, Aug. 9 at 7 p.m. at the Marcus Majestic.

The title comes from a collection of letters the Love family received in the weeks and months shortly after Ashleigh's murder. It started as a simple project at her high school, sending letters and notes of kind words, encouragement and support to the mourning family. Soon enough, the idea spread out of the high school and across the area, and the letters began pouring into the Love family household. These notes wound up giving Olson

exactly the structure his documentary needed, both technically and emotionally.

"The entire family gathers together in the living room to read the letters, and this is the first time they've read the letters since they received them," Olson described. "They've never opened them; they've basically been sitting in a box – for lack of a better term – collecting dust for the past few years because the family still thought they weren't quite ready. I was hoping, through this documentary, that they would be ready, and we were lucky enough that they felt they were."

The first note comes from Ashleigh's grandparents, and from that very emotional starting point, the documentary moves from letter to letter, story to story, connecting people together – whether they be close relatives or mere acquaintances. It all comes together to create the beautiful, vibrant mosaic that was Ashleigh's life and the community left behind, still living, coming together and looking for answers to Ashleigh's death and those all too similar.

"Obviously, there's been a slew of violent of senseless violent acts happening in Milwaukee lately, especially over the past month or so," Olson said. "This is something we're hearing more and more of, and frankly, Milwaukee's getting more and more sick of it. This is becoming something we can all rally behind and relate to in some shape or form."

As expected, the filming process for "Letters to Ashleigh" was often very emotional and difficult for the family and for Olson, attempting to balance his feelings as a friend to many of his subjects and his responsibilities as a filmmaker.

"It was different and, to be honest, difficult at times," Olson said. "As you would expect, there are scenes within the movie where the family and friends are getting extremely emotional, and as the filmmaker, you have to be able to be on the other side of the camera and, to the best of your ability, not let that bother you so the final product can come through."

"Obviously, as much as I don't like to see my friends showing sad emotion, at the same time, the filmmaker side of me says that's exactly what's going to show that this story is so genuine, seeing that raw emotion," Olson continued. "It's a fine balance. You don't want to be too sucked into that world, but how can you not when you know these people?"

Luckily, from early on in the process, the Love family was behind the film. Of course, there was a little bit of expected uneasiness with having a camera around for such raw and delicate moments. Olson noted, however, that Tammy Love, Ashleigh's mother, almost immediately understood the overwhelming positives that could come from the project and was "110 percent behind the idea."

For Olson, the resulting footage – from both family and friends – ended up telling Ashleigh's story perfectly and naturally.

"Not everybody is used to the camera being on them in Milwaukee," Olson noted. "I think that gives you a more genuine response from the lens. Out in L.A., everybody's used to being on camera, so when people go to the grocery store, they'll practically dress as if they're on a hot set. Here, that's not the case at all. You really get this raw, genuine story that begins to unfold because they're not bracing for it, they're not expecting it. They're just here to tell their story."

Of course, not everyone wanted to be on camera. For some, the emotions were still too raw, the wounds still too fresh, to put them on display for a camera and the world to see. Olson still hopes to see those people at the Saturday premiere, many of whom, according to the filmmaker, said they still supported the documentary's mission.

"(It's) a really interesting story about hope and perseverance," Olson said. "And there's always the idea that maybe this documentary will put Ashleigh's story back in the limelight just long enough so that one more clue can be found that the Milwaukee Police Department needs to get this case solved. Of course, that would be the ultimate goal."

Some of Olson's other goals are more modest in nature, but could help make just as large an impact.

"While this documentary is about Ashleigh and particularly her story and the Love family's story, Ashleigh is, in a lot of ways, a vehicle for other people that can relate to this kind of story," Olson said. "To all those people who've recently lost a loved one because of senseless violence, whether in Milwaukee or Chicago or California or even abroad. These are all stories that are very similar in nature. So we've been using the tagline: Ashleigh's story is our story."