



A Standing, Crying Ovation

Despite the heart wrenching subject matter, documentary filmmaker Kurt Kuenne says his Slamdance hit *Dear Zachary* was the most fun he's ever had making a movie.

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In the summer of 2001, filmmaker Kurt Kuenne was in L.A. editing his documentary *Drive-In Movie Memories* when Andrew Bagby, his lifelong best friend, called. A doctor in residency in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, he was visiting his parents in Northern California and said he would love it if Kurt could come visit for a few days, too.

Kuenne was slammed at work and told his buddy he'd see him at Christmas. But that holiday never came for Bagby, who was murdered by his estranged lover Shirley Turner in Pennsylvania in November. Soon after, she fled to Canada and revealed that she was pregnant with Bagby's child.

In his grief, Kuenne began a new documentary that would celebrate his friend's life and serve as a portrait, for son Zachary, of the father he would never know. At the same time, Bagby's parents, David and Kathleen, had moved to Newfoundland, Canada to try to gain custody of their grandson.

But things took another shocking turn when Turner committed a second heinous crime while out on bail awaiting extradition. No longer just a personal memento of a life cut short, *Dear Zachary* suddenly became a searing indictment of Canada's dysfunctional justice system as well. When this haunting, shattering film made its premiere this week at Park City's Slamdance Film Festival, it received the most sustained ovation of any film I saw this year in Park City. People in the audience were literally weeping during the post-screening Q&A.

"When I heard that Andrew had been killed, one of my first thoughts was that I wanted to put together some kind of memorial for everybody to have, for family and friends," Kuenne tells FilmStew of his documentary's genesis. "I knew that would be a kind of cathartic thing for me as part of my grief process. So I started planning this journey I was going to do and I didn't know how

long it would take. I knew I was going to go on road trips in summer for a couple of years and meet [his other friends and family]."

Kuenne and Bagby became friends in first grade and, as they grew older, Bagby played a key role in the budding filmmaker's early productions. "I was one of those weird kids who was running around making movies with whatever camera I could get my hands on since I was yea high, and I always used to force Andrew to star in them," Kuenne remembers. "He had no acting ambitions, but he was humoring me. As a result, I have his entire youth documented on tape."

Kuenne waited a year after Bagby's death before he started gathering interviews, reasoning that there needed to be some distance from the murder in order for people to be ready to not only mourn Bagby but also to celebrate his life. Even so, at times it was rough going. When he went to Newfoundland to visit the Bagby's and meet Zachary, they asked to see the interviews he'd done. He warned them that their emotions might be still too raw.

"I'd put the interviews on and everyone would start bawling and disintegrate," he recalls.

Days like that were awful, but surprisingly Kuenne says making *Dear Zachary* was not painful at all. "It was honestly the most fun I've had shooting any movie," he reveals. "I didn't have a crew. I was on my own, traveling all around the continent. I was getting to meet all these amazing people that I'd heard about – mostly it was them sharing their memories of Andrew with me."

"It was pure pleasure, getting to see these people I'd always wanted to see," Kuenne insists. "Even during the editing, yeah, there's difficult aspects to the story, but every day, I was getting to sit down with Andrew and Zachary and this whole slew of family and friends, so it was like getting to hang out with this amazing group of people every day."

As Kuenne went along, the focus of the film changed, becoming less about Andrew's life and death and more about his parents. It was transformed into a story of grief, rage, survival and determination, a tale of two parents wrestling with an indifferent Canadian legal system that affords more rights to the accused than to a vulnerable infant.

"I sort of see this as a real-life version of *It's a Wonderful Life*, not just with Andrew but more with his parents," Kuenne observes. "When they first found out that Andrew was murdered, they wanted to take care of his effects and then just go kill themselves. They just didn't have anything else to live for. That's what they said, because Andrew was their only child."

"But the amazing thing that happened is, they are such warm, giving people that they've amassed this insanely huge extended family of people around them," he adds. "So that when they were at

their darkest hour of need, all of these people came to help them and kept them here. And that's why they're still here and that's why they're still going."

Kuenne sees *Dear Zachary* in part as an indictment of the Canadian legal landscape, particularly a bail system that let someone charged with first-degree murder out twice, reasoning in the second instance that since Turner already killed the person that she had a grudge against, she was no threat to society. At press time, he was in talks with a distributor for a theatrical release and hopes to raise the film's profile further with more showings on the festival circuit. Kuenne would also eventually like to show *Dear Zachary* to the Canadian Parliament and on broadcast television north of the border, in hopes it could influence the country into changing its laws.

A winner of a 2002 Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting, granted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, Kuenne also composes film music and has made several award-winning comedy shorts. He recently inked a deal with a Romanian company to helm his first feature. But he admits that his friend's murder and making *Dear Zachary* has altered his priorities.

"It really made understand 100 percent what is important to me in life," he states emphatically. "It just made me realize, you know what? People are more important than jobs or work and you may not get another chance to see somebody, so if you get a chance to see somebody, always put them first."