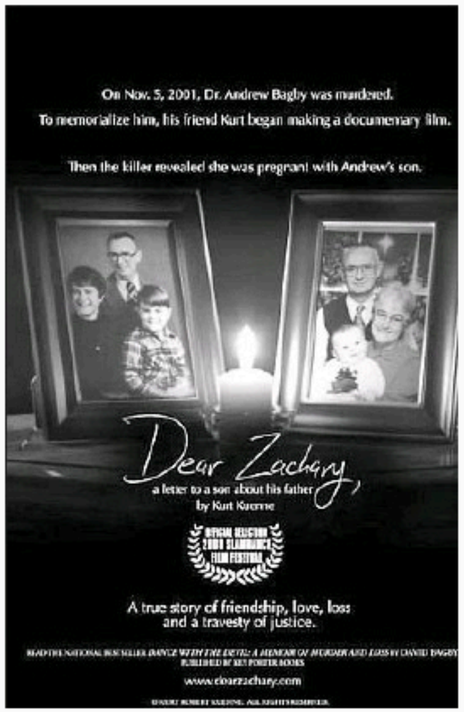
CULTURE

Grief called into action

Quest to reveal a murdered father to his young son ends up as activism

California · Southern California · Shirley Turner · Memorial University of Newfoundland



Filmmaker Kurt Kuenne will attend the Edmonton screening of Dear Zachary.

When American filmmaker Kurt Kuenne's friend Andrew Bagby was murdered in November 2001, he decided to create a memorial for Bagby's friends and family. What he didn't know is how this deeply personal expression would turn into something that might change Canadian law.

Kuenne and Bagby had been friends since they were seven years old, growing up in Southern California. Kuenne began by sorting through hours of old videotape and interviewing people who knew Bagby. He was kind, they said. He was a good friend. He obviously made a tremendous impact on all their lives: several friends had Bagby as their best man at their weddings. "The best thing about being an only child," said Bagby in one of his toasts, "is that I get to choose my brothers."

We learn that his murderer was a woman, Shirley Turner, who had been his girlfriend while both attended Memorial University medical school in St. John's. After graduation, he ended their relationship. She later boarded a plane to find him in Pennsylvania, where he worked, drove out to a secluded place and shot him, then returned home to Newfoundland. More sickening still, not only was Bagby's murderer running free, but she announced that she was pregnant with his child.

Kuenne changes the scope of his project to become a message to this baby — a son, named Zachary — to let him learn about his father's life and the many people who are connected to him as they once were connected to Bagby. At this point in the film, Bagby's parents, Kate and Dave, move to Newfoundland to pursue custody of their grandson, while an extradition hearing begins for Turner. That the legal process is slow, on both counts, is understating the painful wait- ing game as hopes are realized and dashed.

This personal journey quickly becomes much more than one man missing his childhood friend. It becomes a process of excavation, a catalyst that transcends one family's grief into a call to action. There is anger and frustration with the Canadian legal system for dragging its feet during the extradition process, and with the laws governing bail for accused murderers. There is a website given at the end of the film to help send the message.

Dear Zachary is definitely hard to watch. It seems voyeuristic, and sometimes imbued with the very private, not always positive emotions of the Bagby family and their closest friends. By inviting us in, Kuenne includes us in Bagby's community. If it makes it easier, you can see this documentary as art's transformative power. You won't leave unchanged.

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