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DEAR ZACHARY: A LETTER TO A SON ABOUT HIS FATHER

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Kurt Kuenne directs an emotional powerhouse that pays tribute to friend while calling for change to Canada's judicial system in DEAR ZACHARY: A LETTER TO A SON ABOUT HIS FATHER
by Andrew Brudz

"What would be the difference if one person weren't alive?"

It's a question that filmmaker Kurt Kuenne investigates in DEAR ZACHARY: A LETTER TO A SON ABOUT HIS FATHER.

Kuenne has been making films with his best friend Andrew Bagby since they were children growing up in California's Bay Area in the 80s. This film, however, marks their final collaboration together.

On November 6, 2001, Dr. Andrew Bagby was found shot to death in the parking lot of Keystone State Park in the small Pennsylvania town where he worked as a General Practitioner.

When Dr. Shirley Turner, Andrew's ex-girlfriend and the woman accused of murdering him, reveals she is pregnant with his child, Kuenne sets out to document the life of a father who would never meet his son.

It's an experiment of monumental proportions: "to travel far and wide, to talk to everyone that ever knew and loved him. To learn everything there was to know, and to make one last movie with him. I had no idea how many years it would take or how I would even know when I was done."

Kuenne's journey leads him from California to Pennsylvania, Newfoundland to England, to more than 100 of Andrew's friends and relatives and hundreds of hours of footage. They reminisce about the idiosyncratic (his chronic nail-biting) to the heart wrenching (his parents describe the gruesome visit to the morgue to identify their son's bullet-riddled body).

Through a stylish collage of interviews, family photos, court footage, and Kuenne's own early films, he tells the story of Andrew's life and death. What amounts is an intensely personal film with the heart of an epic.

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"In watching my old raw footage, the young me is constantly telling Andrew to stop clowning around and do as directed," Kuenne says. "And as an adult, all I wanted to find were the moments when he was clowning around, being himself."

It's a departure for Kuenne, who is more known for writing, directing and composing the score for his quirky comedic shorts like Rent-a-Person.

"As a kid, I never even entertained the idea of making a documentary. My interest was only in fiction films, and they're still my principal love, says Kuenne. "But in 2000, I was hired to make a documentary (Drive-In Movie Memories) and discovered that I had a love of the form. Upon receiving the news of [Andrew's] death, my thoughts immediately jumped to making a documentary film about him, though it wasn't intended for public consumption at that time."

But this is as much Andrew's story as it is that of his courageous parents, Kate and David, and their seemingly endless, often painful struggle for custody of their grandson.

But when Turner is released on bail from her Newfoundland prison cell, DEAR ZACHARY takes a marked shift in tone – from a poignant, personal tribute to an indictment of and call for change in Canada's often-imperfect judicial system.

"When the second tragedy depicted in the film occurred, for a while I lost any sense of why I was even making this film," says Kuenne. "I put the footage away and worked on other projects."

"But as I saw that Andrew's parents were starting to speak out publicly in support of bail reform in Canada – and it became clear that they wanted their story told publicly – the whole reason I finished a public version of the film was to get it seen by Canadian citizens, so that they would learn about what happened here and hopefully be moved to write Parliament in support of bail reform."

And with its international premiere and strong support for his cause, we can begin to see what can be different when one person is no longer alive.

DEAR ZACHARY: A LETTER TO A SON ABOUT HIS FATHER screens Friday, April 25 at 6:30 PM at the Bloor Cinema and again Sunday, April 27 at 11:00 AM at the SCENE Screening Room at the Isabel Bader Theatre.