The Telegram

‘Dear Zachary’ hits chord with viewers

Director says he’s been inundated with support, e-mails

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Since it aired on television across North America last weekend, a documentary about the lives and murders of Dr. Andrew Bagby and his son, Zachary Turner, has inspired people to write the filmmaker, telling him how it has changed their lives.

Kurt Kuenne, a close friend of Bagby, told The Telegram he has received hundreds of e-mails since his film “Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About his Father” aired on MSNBC Sunday, both from people who say they have written Parliament and the attorney general to lobby for justice system changes, and from those who say the film touched them like no other.

“So many have written to me, saying that the film has changed their life, made them appreciate their loved ones more, and given them a new perspective,” Kuenne said.

“(One couple) said they’d been having trouble raising their child, and were sitting down to read a book on parenting, then “Dear Zachary” came on TV, and (Andrew’s parents) Kate and David taught them more about parenting in 90 minutes than the book could ever do.

“At least three people have written to me now who said they had been clinically depressed and considering suicide, but after seeing the difference Andrew was able to make in so many lives, it snapped them out of it, made them want to live and be like him. I made this film to hopefully save lives by changing bail law; I never dreamed that it might also do it in other ways.”

Kuenne started making the film after Bagby was murdered in a Pennsylvania park in November 2001. Newfoundland native Dr. Shirley Turner, Bagby’s former girlfriend, was accused of his murder.

She returned to Newfoundland and was fighting to stay in Canada when she gave birth to Zachary.

Bagby’s parents moved to St. John’s to be near the baby and had hoped to gain full custody of him. However, in August 2003, Turner — who was out on bail — drugged Zachary and jumped off a wharf in Conception Bay South with him, drowning them both.

The Turner Review and Investigation, commissioned by the province after the deaths, concluded Zachary would likely still be alive if Turner hadn’t been granted bail.

Kuenne has turned his film into a tribute to Bagby’s parents as well as a plea to the Canadian government for changes to the justice system so accused murderers won’t be given bail.

After a screening in St. John’s a week ago, the National Board of Review has named “Dear Zachary” one of the top five documentaries of the year.

“It’s a tremendous honour, as they see pretty much every film released during the year and have a lot of options for their year-end accolades,” Kuenne told The Telegram. “I’ve seen all but one of the other films on that list, and they’re all fantastic movies, so it’s humbling to be named in that com- pany.”

While Kuenne said he’s thrilled so many people — including a provincial court judge, Crown prosecutors, and Darlene Neville, the province’s child and youth advocate — attended the local screening, he’s disappointed and concerned that Premier Danny Williams, Justice Minister Tom Marshall and Finance Minister Jerome Kennedy did not.

“Once they change the law to deny bail to people accused of murder while awaiting trial, they’ll stop hearing from me, but in the meantime, we’re still wide open for a repeat performance,” Kuenne said, adding he’s organizing a screening in Ottawa in the coming months and is hoping federal politicians will attend.

The proceeds from the film are going to scholarships in Bagby’s and Zachary’s names at MUN and in Latrobe, Pa.; the first round expected to be delivered this week. It’s an exciting feeling to be able to contribute to the scholarships in a significant way, Kuenne said.

“Andrew invested in my first feature film more than 10 years ago, and he was killed before I ever got to pay him back, so this feels like I’m finally getting to pay him back, with interest.”

Due to the high ratings of last week’s TV showing, “Dear Zachary” will air on MSNBC again this Sunday at 5:30 p.m. local time and again in early January. The DVD will be released Feb. 10.

— Submitted photo by David Bagby

Filmmaker Kurt Kuenne gives one-year-old Zachary Turner a kiss upon meeting him July 2003. Kuenne’s film about the murders of Zachary and his father, Andrew Bagby, has generated considerable positive reader feedback.