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Can filmmaker turn Pittsburgh's diaspora into a return?



Mark Knobil photo

Franco Harris (right) leads his son Franco "Dok" Harris (left) and Carl Kurlander on a walk on the North Side during filming for Kurlander's documentary. Information about the film is available at www.thepittsburgh-movie.com.

BY SUSAN JACOBS
Associate Editor

When Carl Kurlander decided to leave Hollywood behind in 2001 and return to his native Pittsburgh, the screenwriter got the same incredulous reaction from many of his friends.

"Pittsburgh?" they asked. "You're moving to Pittsburgh?"

Why would a successful movie and television writer leave behind a glamorous life in Los Angeles to move to the Steel City?

For Kurlander, it was about returning to his roots, and regaining a sense of community and authenticity that he didn't have in L.A.

In the nearly two decades since he wrote the screenplay for the 1985 Brat Pack film, "St. Elmo's Fire," he had become a cog in the Hollywood machinery, turning out television shows that lacked the passion and inspiration with which he had begun. A longtime job as a producer for the teen series "Saved by the Bell" led him to work on other mediocre teen programming.

"I was like Holden Caulfield's older brother in 'The Catcher in the Rye,'" said Kurlander. "I wrote one good story and sold out to Hollywood."

Coming back to his roots helped him regain his artistic vision. After all, his long-lived crush on a Pittsburgh girl, Lynn Snyderman, had inspired him to write "St. Elmo's Fire" in the first place.

Now, he is completing a first-person documentary about his beloved hometown. The film, tentatively titled "A Tale of Two Cities," chronicles Kurlander's homecoming and explores ways in which Pittsburgh can return to its former glory.

In 2005 and 2006, Kurlander asked 19 Pittsburgh personalities, from Franco Harris and

Paul O'Neill to a local nun, to talk to him about what Pittsburgh needs to do to reinvent itself. Their conversations, filmed on location throughout the city, suggest innovations in the arts and sciences, in business and politics and in simply getting over Pittsburgh's complex about itself.

The nun, Sister Linda Yankowski of Holy Family Institute in Sewickley, tells Kurlander that the path to salvation for Pittsburgh is in getting over its past and moving on.

"That's what salvation's about," said Kurlander. "It's about looking at yourself differently."

But the film is as much about Kurlander's personal journey as it is about the city's struggle to reinvent itself. It was shortly before 9/11 that Kurlander moved back to Pittsburgh with his wife and 2-year-old daughter so that he could work at the University of Pittsburgh for one year as a visiting professor. They were so happy here that they decided to stay.

As much as they loved returning to Squirrel Hill and telling their friends they were living in the real Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood, all around them the city was struggling. Not long after his homecoming, Mr. Rogers died, the Steelers had a losing season and the city announced that it was financially distressed.

It was clear to Kurlander that the city needed to turn itself around, and he decided to use his filmmaking talents to help out.

As he interviewed his Pittsburgh "neighbors," Kurlander was struck by the number of Pittsburghers who have achieved great things, both locally and beyond. Dr. Thomas Starzl, the transplant surgery pioneer; Teresa Heinz Kerry, philanthropist; and Bill Strickland, founder of the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, are some of the people Kurlander interviewed.

"These are the most incredible people I've ever met," he said.

Learning about another Pittsburgher, Dr. Jonas Salk, inspired Kurlander's next project — a documentary about the role Pittsburghers played in eradicating polio, which he is working on now.

But first things first. "A Tale of Two Cities" is in postproduction and may be in theaters by the end of this year.

A documentary, the film does not follow a script. Rather, the series of spontaneous interviews and encounters in the film were influenced by background events in the city, which seemed to be unfolding as though they were orchestrated by a Hollywood script. During production, the Steelers won the Super Bowl and Bob O'Connor won his bid for mayor.

"You can't ask for a better comeback story, if you were writing a movie," said Kurlander.

The late mayor was campaigning during much of the filming, and he seemed to be a constant presence in the city, wherever Kurlander and his crew went.

O'Connor's message of believing in Pittsburgh and being willing to work together resonates with Kurlander, who says that it is Pittsburghers themselves who can save their city.

"You can really make a difference in Pittsburgh," he said. "Pittsburgh neighbors will be what changes Pittsburgh."

He sees the story of Pittsburgh as one that is similar to that of the Jewish people. Just as the Jews were exiled from the Holy Land, so too Pittsburgh has its own diaspora of faithful former citizens longing to come home.

"You have to hope there's something good in store," he said.

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