

Sarasota director builds a bridge of empathy with new film

yourobserver.com/news/2023/may/10/sarasota-director-builds-a-bridge-of-empathy-with-new-film

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May 10, 2023

KT Curran's film shines a light on "compassion fatigue" among first responders.

By [Monica Roman Gagnier](#) | 3:00 p.m. May 10, 2023



Valerie LeBlanc stars in KT Curran's "Bridge to the Other Side," a feature about first responders that has been making the film festival circuit.

Courtesy photo

Arts + Culture

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Director KT Curran is no stranger to the film festival circuit. For the last eight months, she's shown her stunning feature, "Bridge to the Other Side," at about a dozen festivals, including the Sarasota Film Festival, where the film won two awards in April, and the Fort Myers Film Festival, where it will be presented to the public on May 18.

But the May 2 presentation of "Bridge to the Other Side" at Resilient Retreat, a lush 84-acre compound way down Fruitville Road, was different from the other screenings.

Curran's emotional antennae were even more attuned than usual and with good reason: It was the first time the director had shown her film to an audience of first responders, the subject of her film.

There were no visible tears shed after the screening, though there may have been when the lights were down. There was a palpable sense of discomfort as the film unspooled to the sounds of coughing, bodies shifting in chairs and nervous fidgeting.

"Bridge to the Other Side" is a raw, emotional journey that follows Max Toussante, a former high school guidance counselor drowning in alcohol and grief after losing her firefighter husband to COVID. On a whim, she decides to join a crisis response team being formed by her late husband's fire department. Her partner is Jake Monroe, a firefighter who has given up rescue diving because of the toll it has taken on his psyche and his family — he is divorced.

Writer in the morning, producer in the afternoon

Curran wrote and directed "Bridge to the Other Side" after interviewing 150 first responders and their family members. She spent mornings writing her script and put a producer's hat of sorts on in the afternoon, she says, although the film had a real producer in Jerry Chambless.

The firefighters, police officers, chaplains and other first responders gathered in a carriage house to watch Curran's film may not have experienced the exact losses suffered by Toussante (Valerie LeBlanc) and Monroe (Chase Garland) or had their jobs threatened by government cuts, it was obvious that they identified with the film nonetheless.

A reporter attending the Resilient Retreat screening promised to be a fly on the wall, lest any questions act as a trigger for those who watched the film. But it can be observed that the most revealing reactions came from older audience members who were retired and, as a result, were not jeopardizing their livelihoods by talking about their experience.



Director KT Curran on the set of the film "Bridge to the Other Side," which was filmed in and around Sarasota in December 2021.
Courtesy photo

During a Q&A after the film, Curran and members of Resilient Retreat's board, including Chaplain Kelvin Foster, a former firefighter and EMT, discussed the challenges that face first responders and health care professionals following the onslaught of COVID and the stigmatism facing those who reach out for help.

Indeed, one of the characters in Curran's film who contemplates jumping off the bridge is a nurse who has lost patients to COVID. She feels like a failure because she wasn't able to save their lives.

Resilient Retreat offers workshops and weekend programs free of charge for first responders who need to recuperate from trauma and strengthen their emotional well-being. Like Curran's film, it receives the support of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation.

Firefighter put in handcuffs for mental health confession

One former firefighter at the Resilient Retreat screening described being led away in handcuffs by the police, who were called to escort him from his firehouse after he told his boss that he was no longer up to the job emotionally.

Curran used real actors and places in her film, which was filmed in and around Sarasota during December 2021. The bridge in "Bridge to the Other Side" is the Ringling Bridge, but the small city in the film is named Sunrise, not Sarasota. The panoramic shots delivered by a drone give the film a high-quality feel typically found in a Hollywood production.

Some of the performers in Curran's film were real-life first responders. She credits the participation of the Cape Coral Fire Department with helping to make the film a reality.

When Curran started thinking about her script for "Bridge to the Other Side," she was focused primarily on the daily traumas experienced by public safety and health care professionals.

But with the pandemic, she began hearing more and more about the burnout on the front lines by doctors, nurses and others being overwhelmed by the physical burdens of caring for the sick and dying and the emotional pain of being separated from loved ones to prevent the virus from spreading.

Improv skills are useful in independent film

"I knew there was a high level of depression, divorce and other serious issues among our most heroic members of society. But until COVID I hadn't realized how much firefighters and police officers can be affected by compassion fatigue," Curran said. "I wanted to celebrate the efforts of first responders and try to destigmatize mental health issues for them."

A former actress, Curran is a playwright who has published 20 plays primarily dealing with social issues. She's also skilled at improvisation, a requirement for any successful independent filmmaker.

Prior to forming the nonprofit Wingspan Productions three years ago, Curran was best known for a 2019 film about high school called "Surviving Lunch."

Her experience in dealing with troubled teens shines through in "Bridge to the Other Side," as Max and Jake answer a call for help at Max's former school, where a student is distraught because her father has succumbed to COVID.

"Bridge to the Other Side" may be the first feature from Wingspan, but it is just the latest example of how Curran uses art to educate filmgoers about mental health and to break down cultural barriers deterring survivors of abuse and trauma from seeking help.

Caught in the COVID cross-hairs

During the production of "Bridge to the Other Side," Curran and her cast and crew were caught in the cross-hairs of COVID themselves. Curran thought the coast would be clear when she and her cinematographer Ryan Patrick Dean were scheduled to start shooting during the first week of December 2021. But that's when the Omicron variant of COVID hit Sarasota.

"We formed a bubble. We had nurses coming on the set and testing everyone. A magical muse was following us. Nobody tested positive until the end," Curran recalled.

After eight months of non-stop promotion to support "Bridge from the Other Side," Curran is ready to take a breather.

After being the recipient of an impromptu birthday party at Resilient Retreat, replete with cupcakes for the audience and one with a candle for Curran, the director drove into Sarasota for a celebration hosted by friends. The next day she was scheduled to fly to Los Angeles to visit family.

Curran's not ready to talk what her next project is, but she promises it will stay true to Wingspan's mission, which is nothing less than producing films that "deal with life-altering issues, have high production values and help the world."

Curran wants to save the world, one film at a time.

In the meantime, her goal is the same as that of every indie filmmaker: maximizing exposure for her production in the hopes of getting a distribution deal of some kind.



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