

Catholic directors seize movie opportunities in state

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



Since their days at Catholic High School in Little Rock, Michael Ferrara, class of 2009, and J. Cole Lansden, class of 2010, have both recognized their potential as filmmakers and discovered the advantages of being filmmakers in Arkansas.

A 2013 graduate of the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, Ferrara wanted to make movies since an early age. Shortly after arriving at UCA, he entered the school's digital filmmaking program, but it wasn't until his senior year that he made what he calls his "first real film."

"Everything else before that was a project," he said. "This was something that I really wanted to do, really believed in."

Ferrara's senior thesis, "Citizen Noir," a short film comedy, won Best Screenplay at the 2013 UCA Film Festival. Ferrara went on to win five more awards in the 2013 Conway Film Festival, including Best Directing.

Lansden found his love for film at an early age while acting in a commercial.

"There's 30 people back behind the camera doing all these crazy things that I didn't understand...at that moment, I was like, 'Wow, film is awesome. I really want to be a part of this set.'"

Lansden also attends UCA, pursuing a degree in digital filmmaking. He considers his best work to be his senior thesis film, "Watch the Rhine," a short film set in World War II France.

The two agree that Arkansas is an especially great place for independent film.

"This state is on the cusp of really breaking through," Ferrara said.

Both guys agreed the best parts of filming in Arkansas are the people and their support.

"We're all raw and just dying to have a big project to work on," Ferrara said. "It's more important to have people than it is money or equipment. It's really important to have people behind you that believe in you and want to work for you."

"You can buy a new camera, but you can't buy trust and familiarity," Lansden added.

The filmmakers related this point to their friendship. Besides attending the same high school, they also attended Our Lady of the Holy Souls School in Little Rock, where they are also members of Holy Souls Parish.

"I don't only trust (Ferrara) as a director," Lansden said. "I trust him as a person. It takes years and years to build trust like that."

Along with people, the state also offers opportunity. Arkansas is home to one of the top-25-rated film festivals in the U.S., the Little Rock Film Festival. Both filmmakers have volunteered at the festival in the past and in May they were able to screen their senior thesis films, which were accepted into the "Made in Arkansas" lineup.

"Getting into that was such a blessing and such a privilege," Ferrara said. "It made me feel more like a filmmaker."

For Lansden, LRFF offered him not only a chance to have his film screened but also a job. He is currently a personal assistant at the LRFF office, and he has worked on several documentaries.

"I guess you could say I'm a professional filmmaker," he said, smiling.

For the two, filmmaking is their art.

"Really all filmmakers are a bunch of storytellers," Lansden said. "We just figured out a cool way to tell our stories."

The filmmakers have also learned the business side of filmmaking.

"You need to do this without money first," Ferrara said.

Lansden agreed. "If you're going into movies for the money, you're not going to be a good filmmaker," he said.

The friends couldn't go into much detail about their current projects but confirmed they just finished a film together for LRFF's 48-Hour Film Project, a challenge to shoot and edit a film in 48 hours. They plan to work on many more films together.