



Kurt Neale makes
meaningful movies and
gives them away.

FACING FEARS

A Lake Highlands filmmaker uses personal stories
about sensitive subjects to build bridges

By CHRISTINA HUGHES BABB



Memorial Day May 29th

Lake Highlands Town Center
7100 Wildcat Way, Dallas, TX 75231

Run 9:30 am

Check in 8:30am

Festival

Local artisans and kid zone

9:00 – 2:00

Food Trucks

11:00 – 2:00

SIGN UP FOR 5K

CAMPSWEENEY.ORG/5K



LAKE HIGHLANDS
PUBLIC IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Devastation. Nightmare. A living hell. Just a few descriptors used by subjects of Kurt Neale's latest feature-length documentary, "ASK," in attempt to explain addiction. "I mean, I hate myself, on a regular basis," says an alcoholic named Caleb. Another drug addict's mother cries, trying to explain co-dependency. "When you see all the things you were doing to help your child, and in fact you were like an accomplice ..."

A co-dependent person, typically a parent or a spouse, is on the same hamster wheel as the addict they love, viewers learn. By attempting to control an uncontrollable illness, they might inadvertently allow it to continue.

Our nation is in the midst of an unprecedented opioid epidemic. Since 1999, deaths related to opiate overdose has quadrupled, according to the United States Department of Health and Human Services. The crisis drew Neale to create the documentary about addiction and co-dependency, "a less recognizable problem," notes the film's opening slide. In the process it became more personal as Neale and his wife learned their own son was battling substance abuse.

"It blew up our world. We would never have seen our own co-dependency without what our son went through," he says. The Neales' son does not appear in the interviews, but the family's experience contributes to "the spirit of true recovery" in which the film is made.

Neale and his team (co-producer Taylor Farman, editor Steve Vanderheide, art director Carolyn Wilder, music and sound director Aaron Rose, webmaster Don Dinnerville and associate producer Chico West) follow several recovering addicts and their families. They are seemingly hopeless cases — relatively young people who have been to and from rehab, been given second, third and fourth chances — and their hapless parents

who try everything to get them healthy. Some of the stories take a healing turn when the co-dependent loved one decides to stop enabling the addict. Others are not so satisfying. Even if a loving father does everything right and stops enabling, his child can still die.

"ASK" ends at a treatment center in beautiful Montana where residents partake in an exercise. In a maze, blindfolded, they try to find their way out. Eventually they learn the escape is to ask for help.

Neale, the filmmaker from Lake Highlands, is no stranger to difficult topics, often as they relate to spirituality. His exploratory and pragmatic direction prevents his two full-length documentaries from falling into the "religious" genre.

His first, "Compelling Love," explored gender identity and sexuality. The initial several interviews feature individuals with accepting attitudes toward varying LGBT lifestyles. Just when the progressive viewer is feeling quite comfortable, perhaps, the grinning face of Pastor Robert Jeffress Jr., the southern Baptist minister and Fox News regular known for his "Gay is not OK" sermon, fills the screen. The heart, for some watchers, might turn icy as the pastor suggests that liberals, not the religious right, are the intolerant ones, in his experience.

In "Compelling Love," "everyone gets to confront someone who makes them uncomfortable, who is on the other side of the table, without having to understand," Neale says.

With shifts such as this, Neale does what truly good journalists do; he infu-



Filmmaker Kurt Neale's aim: Love unconditionally and help others do the same.

riates people on both sides.

Criticism came from the more extreme conservatives and liberals, he says.

“The right thought I should have condemned homosexuality. The other side thought I wasn’t advocating enough for them.”

Neale has an agenda, but it has little to do with swaying people’s political stances.

He wants to deconstruct walls made of deep-rooted, complex dogmas. He’s whittled his own faith down to a line delivered by the biblical Jesus when his apostles asked what commandment is most important. The answer: Love God ... and each other.

“I am just a weird guy who is very attracted to the person in Jesus Christ. I am not religiously strict — I am a messy follower of Jesus,” Neale says.

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“ASK” is about love that transcends seemingly nonsensical, destructive actions as much as it is about healing from addiction or loss.

“Compelling Love” is not really about sexuality or gender or religion. Rather, it is an exercise in listening and loving someone with whom we might never begin to find common ground.

On the filmmaking side, the process is like “birthing a baby,” he says. Neale’s crew is predominately unpaid volunteers who share his vision. “And they have worked so hard to make this happen,” he says.

Both movies were financed by donations.

Professionally, he relies on some of the practices taught in 12-step programs, like “give away freely what has been given to us” and “gaining publicity through attraction rather than promotion.”

Both of his films, following free screenings at local theaters, are available online at no cost.

“There is enough corruption in the recovery industry,” he points out. “We want to humbly, authentically give away what we have created,” he says.

compellinglovetfilm.com
askdocumentary.com

NORTH HAVEN *Gardens*



Water Garden Weekend & Koi Auction



Saturday, May 13th

Featuring original artwork in The Café at NHG by Elizabeth Schowachert, Barbara Mason and others.

Details at NHG.com



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