

Arts & Entertainment

Creating Paul Jackson Fund Film Reconnects Rokosny to Hometown

Editor's Note: As families across the country spend the Thanksgiving weekend offering thanks - whether silent or verbalized - for the bounty bestowed upon them, it seemed to be a fitting time to publish the following story. ~Happy Thanksgiving, Michael

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD - A blend of fate and fortune brought former Westfield resident John Rokosny back to his hometown to tell the tale of Paul Jackson.

Mr. Rokosny, a producer and director of public-service videos, created a film for the Paul Jackson Fund, which began in 1991 to benefit Mr. Jackson, a 1979 Westfield High School (WHS) graduate who was diagnosed with a spinal-cord tumor and rendered paralyzed after his second surgery.

When Mr. Jackson's payments leveled off as his health steadied for a period, he used the fund to help others.

After a courageous struggle, Mr. Jackson died on February 22, 2009, at the age of 47. His wish was for the fund to continue, even after his death, to assist those most in need. The fund, a tax-exempt charity, serves as a resource of last resort for individuals and families facing a financial crisis due to a debilitating long-term illness or dis-

ability. The fund provides grants to qualifying individuals in the tri-state area for health- and family-related needs.

Even in Mr. Jackson's later days, slowed by the illness, he made his way to the homes of families who, without his assistance, could not have afforded an expensive procedure or therapy, or would not have had the wherewithal to construct a ramp for someone who had become wheelchair-bound.

Mr. Rokosny's short film on the fund shows the lasting impact of Mr. Jackson's work; it shines a light on the people whom Mr. Jackson touched and allows them to offer their stories as well as their appreciation for being given the gift of his presence.

It is not without a smidge of serendipity that the beneficiaries of the fund linked up with Mr. Jackson, and in a sense, Mr. Rokosny's involvement in the project is not without its own degree of destiny.

Mr. Rokosny grew up in Westfield and graduated from WHS in 1982; in 1986, he went to New York City to pursue a music career. After meeting a man who owned a video-production company and telling him of his songwriting background, Mr. Rokosny earned a gig with the company, eventu-

ally working as a production assistant.

He went from production assistant to producer and started producing a TV series called "Quiet Triumphs," which he called a "perfect fit" for him. Shortly after, he decided to go out on his own. Now, he and his partner, Andriette Redmann, produce professional fundraising films for charities, highlighting the altruistic work of celebrities. This, he said, was the couple's dream in the early 1990s.

"It (tying together celebrities and their charitable work) felt really natural to me. You're doing really good work, and you're helping a lot of people. You're making a film - which is fun to do - and then you can, over a period of time, see how much it spreads and promotes awareness to different causes. You keep getting rewards from it," Mr. Rokosny said.

Starting out playing in bands at WHS, Mr. Rokosny would go on to serve as a road replacement guitarist for The Smithereens and play on their first record. His passion for creating music persists to this day, as Mr. Rokosny and Ms. Redmann perform in the band Sun Palace. The duo tries to keep its music alive in its video work, employing tracks to complement their video footage.

Mr. Rokosny, one of six children, has known the Jackson family, and their eight children, his entire life.

"We all had a Jackson in our grade," he remembered.

Paul was a couple years older than Mr. Rokosny and was friends with his older brother. When Mr. Jackson first got sick, the town rallied together and formed the fund to help him with his bills.

"I had a group called Carry Nation," Mr. Rokosny said. "We did a benefit concert with a few other local bands. It was one of the first fundraisers for the fund (circa 1989). After that, I just loosely followed Paul's story. I lost touch with the whole thing. Paul was very private."

Twenty years passed, and through the grapevine, Mr. Rokosny heard that Mr. Jackson had gotten sick again. He began to follow the story more closely, asking his brother and friends about Mr. Jackson's condition. Shortly after, in 2009, Mr. Jackson passed away, as Sun Palace was putting the finishing touches on its latest release.

"We made this record, and I said to Andriette, 'I want to put his name down and remember him on this record.'" The couple sent the record to Mr. Jackson's parents and sister Mary, who wrote back in an e-mail that started the ball rolling on the eventual project.

"It was just a great thing to get back involved with," Mr. Rokosny said. "It just felt so right. It felt like Paul's spirit had put us together. One little connection to another. Just putting the name on the record [had led us here]."

That same sense of fate was not lost on Ms. Jackson.



Left to right: Andriette Redmann, Michael J. Pollack, and John Rokosny

"There is a bit of serendipity," Ms. Jackson told *The Westfield Leader* and *The Times* in a phone interview. "John and Andriette wrote a condolence note to my parents; they also included the CD, and they did list Paul in memory of. I just happened to be in my parents' kitchen the day it arrived. I looked [John] up. I didn't know what he did for a living. The idea came to me. I wrote him a long e-mail, around this time last year, and just explained the situation... I threw the idea out about making the film. I didn't know what that would entail or if he'd be interested. We met, sent countless e-mails back and forth, and I put him in touch with volunteers. It just evolved over time. They were very generous to come and meet with us and film different people... The stars were aligned. It was meant to be. They were very enthusiastic and very surprised at how much good the fund has done over the year. They saw the struggle first-hand."

And seeing that struggle had a fundamental impact on the couple.

"I felt really honored to be able to come back and get associated with the family again and to come back to Westfield and do a project here," Mr. Rokosny said. "It was really fulfilling, and the emotions that have come out of it have been incredible for us. Interviewing people who were helped by Paul has been some of the most deep and moving - and 'intense,' Ms. Redmann noted - experiences."

The couple works with a lot of larger national charities. The Paul Jackson Fund may be smaller and more local, but as Ms. Redmann said, "they've affected people in a more personal way, which we didn't expect to encounter."

Ms. Jackson is grateful to the couple for helping to present, in concrete fashion, she said, what the fund does and whom it impacts. She was also tremendously pleased that someone who grew up with her family could reunite in this manner.

"John grew up with us," Ms. Jackson said. "When we took over the fund to continue it, which was Paul's wish, I... needed to raise money, and I thought there was a story that would benefit the fund if they heard it. I had the idea to approach John, and that's how it began. I needed to reach a larger audience and tell Paul's story, which was moving, and I wanted something concrete to show people who Paul was and what the fund does for people. What better way to put that into film and talk to some of the people who had volunteered for the fund and been impacted?"

Ms. Jackson said the short film has been "successful in reaching a larger audience."

"And I think it will evolve over time. It's easy for us to hand someone a DVD or direct them to a website. It's helpful and will continue to be... John did a terrific job with the film. I'm very grateful to their help. It portrays the fund in a positive way."

The short film, as Ms. Redmann says in her voiceover, shows how "[Paul's] own personal tragedy became his inspiration. He now had a calling."

Kevin O'Callaghan, a major supporter of the fund, is quoted in the film, recounting, "He (Paul) would say, 'Given the choice of being able to walk again or run the fund, I choose running the fund.'"

As Mr. Rokosny said, "It's not easy for a healthy person to live their life and raise money to help others and to find people who need help. It's not easy. For a person in a wheelchair - it's almost unheard of."

Mr. Jackson, being paralyzed, operated a special van that was built for him; he drove around and met prospective beneficiaries of the fund. He would sit with the families and guide them through all the physical and emotional aspects of coping with illness. Talking to families from an authoritative per-

spective, Mr. Jackson provided a great sounding board to those dealing with pain. Just speaking with someone who had gone through tremendous odds was a comfort for families.

"He helped them in so many ways, just to have someone to talk to," Mr. Rokosny said. "It just makes the experience very unique. And for us to follow his trail and go back and interview these people... [We were] finding out what it meant to them. They could barely put it into words. It was a magical story; they said he was like an angel to them. Paul just appeared in their life."

Ms. Redmann, following up on that point, said meeting the recipients of the fund was "an honor."

"It's been a great thing. I love these people," she said.

According to Paul's sister, from an early age, her brother had the intuition and drive to help others.

The family had a shore house in New Jersey, and Paul loved the water from a young age. The family had a small boat, which he would take out into Barnegat Bay.

"If people needed help and needed a tow, he was there to help. He was 13 or 14, and he would tow them in," Ms. Jackson told *The Leader* and *The Times*.

"He had it in him from the start," Mr. Rokosny said after referencing the same story. "Life and circumstances brought him to that place. Unfortunately, it had to be through a series of tragedies that it brought him to the place he was meant to be."

For those who wish to keep up with the fund's story and see the short film, visit pauljacksonfund.org. In other Paul Jackson-related news, the 5K run at

Oak Ridge Park last month was successful and will continue in the future.

Also, the Junior Woman's Club of Westfield has chosen the fund as its recipient of the club's annual fundraising event. Next year's gala will take place at the Grand Summit Hotel on Saturday, March 12, 2011. Interested persons may contact Mary Boland at bolandpauljackson@gmail.com to learn more. Coincidentally, March 12, 2011, would have been Mr. Jackson's 50th birthday.

Assessing the short film they did for the Paul Jackson Fund, Mr. Rokosny said, "This project was so surprising. It hit harder than any [other] one had."

These sentiments are poignant, given the amount of celebrities and interesting charities Mr. Rokosny and Ms. Redmann have had the opportunity to work with and spotlight.

In their production company, NewYorkMVP, they have worked alongside the likes of Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Damon, Sarah Ferguson and Paul Simon.

The company has worked with the Children's Health Fund (CHF) since 2004. CHF was one of the first responders after Hurricane Katrina, bringing medical mobile units to the area. Mr. Rokosny and Ms. Redmann followed CHF down after the storm hit, alongside Paul Simon. Shortly after, they began following Simon and filming the "unbelievable devastation."

Staying in a house sans electricity in near-100-degree heat, Mr. Rokosny remembered the entire crew being wiped out after one particularly long day. They sat on the floor eating their southern catfish dinners and were surprisingly serenaded by Simon, who began giving a private concert and playing "Mrs. Robinson" and "Bridge over Troubled Water."

"We feel really fortunate... we've got to travel around a lot and work with a lot of fun celebrities," Mr. Rokosny said. "Honestly, we could go work for a network and work on a TV show... [but] that wouldn't be as fulfilling. So we make our sacrifices to continue doing work we love to do."

The duo is developing a TV show called "World of Good," which will profile charities, interview celebrities who do charitable deeds and spotlight individuals who do "incredible things." To learn more about the duo, visit newyorkmvp.com.

WHS's 'Midsummer Night' Sees Bard Meet the Hippies

By ERIC D. WILDSTEIN
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD - Imagine, William Shakespeare strolling through Central Park, clad in a pair of his favorite acid-washed jeans on a summer night in 1967. The Westfield High School Theatre Department brought that vision to life this weekend in the fall production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Shakespeare's classic drama had a run of three performances, playing from November 18 through 20. Freshman English teacher and play director Daniel Devlin merged the eloquence of Shakespeare's language with the social influence of New York City during the summer of love.

Led by Westfield High School junior Annie Oldakowski and senior Christopher Morrissey as the young lovers Hermia and Lysander, the *Midsummer Night's Dream* cast commanded the stage as learned Shakespeare thespians.

The dialogue and soliloquies stayed true to Shakespeare's writing, and the young actors delivered their lines with poignancy and precision.

Scenes took place at many of New York City's locales. Beginning in Greenwich Village at Washington Square Park, the play moved to different sections of Central Park and even the famed now-defunct Tavern on the Green restaurant, which remained in operation until 2009 (it is now a public visitors center and gift shop).

Comic relief was found scattered throughout the affair, emerging first with the desperate, lovelorn Helena prancing across the stage in high heels and a handbag.

"The more I love, the more he hateth me," she puts of her lust for Demetrius. Seniors Catalina Gaglioti and Garrett Verdone, who played the despaired duo, spent most of the play

caught in a hide-and-seek match, before poetically falling for each other in the end.

The introduction of the fairy world and its instigators Oberon and Puck, played by seniors Peter Surace and Peter Carmo, served to bridge the free-spirited '60s with reality.

Puck stirs up trouble when he casts a spell on the quarrelsome couples that throws them into a state of irrationality. "A sweet Athenian lady is in love, with a disdainful youth," Oberon says before invoking Demetrius with a fabricated love for Helena.

The play's musical score helped to establish the social themes of turmoil, unrest and peace and love that identified the 1960s. Rock and folk tunes from the Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, The Rolling Stones, The Supremes and more played through each set change and helped the audience feel the spirit of the era.

The fairies performed a memorable rendition of Simon and Garfunkel's "Scarborough Fair," complete with acoustic guitars and hippie dancing. In a sense, it was Woodstock for fairies.

At intermission, patrons were treated to snacks and bottled water available for purchase, as the heavy fog from the events in Act One cleared from the room.

Led by scenic artist and set designer Roy Chambers and senior stage manager Tzvetelina Garneva, the stage crew made a habit of quickly changing the elaborate sets.

The lively stage boasted tall park trees, a throne and an elegant dining theatre in the final acts. Clever lighting set the fairy world aglow, as ominous fog hovered above the stage. Sound effects of thunderclaps and subtle melodies helped establish the mood during many of the scenes.

Adam Ziering's performance as amateur stage-actor Nick Bottom drew much applause from the audience for his physical comedy and enthusiastic cadence. His jubilant "Hee-Haws!" were audible from outside the auditorium when his head is transformed to that of an ass.

Senior Colleen McCabe played Titania, the Fairy Queen, who is seduced by Bottom after also falling victim to a spell, spurring a raucous and lustful display of affection by both characters.

Costume's ranged from knee-high boots, vibrant eveningwear and conservative suits to the tie-dyed, earthy tones and patchwork skirts on the fairies. Fashion paralleled the social diversity in the play as it did in the 1960s.

The capacity crowd gave a rousing applause as the final curtain closed Saturday night. After giving their final bow the seniors were rewarded with roses from their cast-mates.

The Westfield High School Theater Department will next begin work on the spring production of *Sweeney Todd*.

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