

Teacher by day... movie actor by night

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
Wednesday, 20 February 2013 19:39

<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/022113/actorSM.png> **Much to the surprise of his colleagues and students, Port High teacher Joe Belknap is the star of an independently produced horror film that has won critical acclaim**

When Joe Belknap was hired in 2011, his co-workers and students knew he was a promising young teacher starting his career in education at Port Washington High School.

What they didn't know about Belknap, however, remained a secret for the better part of a year.



“I may have mentioned something about it in passing to my colleagues, but I certainly didn't tell any of my students,” Belknap said. “Then over summer break someone must have Googled my name and figured it out.”

What they figured out is that Joe Belknap is Charlie Russell, the lead character in the independent horror film “Dead Weight.”

Word spread quickly that the mild-mannered communications teacher by day was a horror movie actor by night.

“We were all waiting for the day when Joe's students found out, and I kept asking him, ‘Do they know yet?’” said John Pata, co-writer and director of “Dead

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Weight.”

“Then over the summer we noticed all these DVD orders coming in from Port Washington. Shortly after school started, Joe emailed me and said, ‘I’m basically walking around school like a celebrity.’”

A local celebrity, perhaps, but Belknap hasn’t exactly received the Hollywood movie star treatment yet. He will join other cast members at a screening of “Dead Weight” in Kansas City, Mo., this weekend, but there will be no private jets, limos or five-star hotels.

Instead, Belknap will finish teaching for the week, rush home to attend a birthing class with his wife, who is expecting the couple’s first child in April, then hustle to Kansas City to promote the movie and discuss the film with independent movie aficionados.

“I actually managed to find a \$55 flight, but I’ll be driving home with the rest of the cast,” he said.

Such is the life of a 29-year-old teacher who plays the role of a man trekking across the post-apocalyptic landscape of central Wisconsin in a desperate effort to find his girlfriend and survive in a lawless society.

As strangely interesting as the fictional plot sounds, so too are the real-life circumstances that led an aspiring educator, who is still very much focused on being a high school teacher, to try acting for the first time.

It was about three years ago when Belknap found himself at a wedding with Pata and “Dead Weight” co-writer and director Adam Bartlett, two longtime friends and Oshkosh natives. The men talked about movies and music, then went their separate ways.

A short time later, Pata, owner of the independent film company Head Trauma Productions, and Bartlett, who owns the record label Gilead Media, contacted Belknap, told him they were working on a movie and offered him a chance to act in it.

“I told them, ‘You do know that I have no acting experience whatsoever?’” Belknap said. “They said, ‘We know, but let us worry about that.’”

“I was really reluctant to do it because of the time commitment, but I knew this was a rare opportunity, so I read for them and got the lead part. Not too bad for my first time acting.”

Not too bad, but not great either, Pata said.

“The first time Joe read for us, it was a little rough, but we worked with him for five months

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before filming because we believed in him,” Pata said. “When Adam and I first had a chance to talk with Joe, we got to see his characteristics and sense of humor and realized that we share a lot of interests in movies and music.

“In the movie, there are flashbacks to pre-outbreak Charlie, who is a really fun and witty guy. We saw those characteristics in Joe.”

Filming was scheduled for April 2011 in the Oshkosh area, in part because central Wisconsin at that time of year looks a little post-apocalyptic, Pata said.

The other reason was that April was the only time Belknap, who was a student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and still student teaching at the time, was available.



“We had to schedule filming around Joe’s spring break, and we told him that if we get hit by an awful snowstorm it’s all his fault,” Pata said. “So what happened? We got hit by a snowstorm, but it all worked out.”

The movie was filmed over six intense days, during which time the cast and crew of a movie being made on an independent film budget lived together.

“We could have all ended up hating each other, but instead I developed a lot of wonderful friendships,” Belknap said. “The experience was a lot of fun, but it was nerve-racking. We knew that if we screwed something up, there was probably no way to

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get all these people together again to redo it.”

The finished product, which was released in March 2012, is billed as a horror film with a zombie movie feel to it, but it is devoid of gore as well as the living dead.

“The implied threat is always there, but the word zombie is never used and you never see one in the movie,” Belknap said. “We were going for something semi-serious, so skipping the zombies was a good thing. Besides, I really don’t know if we could have pulled off a good looking zombie.”

“Dead Weight” is more a study of the human character in the context of a world redefined by an apocalyptic viral outbreak than a typical horror movie.

“Survival horror mixed with a post-apocalyptic love story” is how Pata describes “Dead Weight.”

“The horror is inside people. It’s what’s left when you take away all the laws and rules of society,” he said. “It’s a little more cerebral, more psychological, than your average horror movie.”

However you describe “Dead Weight,” independent-film critics and film festival judges like it.

“Pata and Bartlett boldly ask the audience to grow up and to embrace the idea that a movie doesn’t have to show intestines being eaten in order to rip your heart out,” critic and artist Ian Simmons wrote on his website *Kicking the Seat*.

“Dead Weight” won best feature, writer and cinematography awards at the 2012 Madison Horror Film Festival and received two nominations at the respected New Orleans Horror Film Festival.

One of those nominations was for best actor.

“Joe was nominated for best actor along with a professional actor who’s been in the business for 30 years,” Pata said. “Joe really impressed us. With the exception of me and Adam, there was no one more dedicated to this project than Joe. The film is 89 minutes long, and Joe is in all but 52 seconds of it.

“We hired professional actors who pulled us aside while we were filming and said, ‘This guy has got to keep on acting.’”

For now, Pata and Bartlett and various other members of the “Dead Weight” cast and crew are busy promoting the film, and Belknap is busy teaching, getting away only on rare occasions to indulge his movie actor alter ego.

Pata said he hopes to find a distributor for the movie, a breakthrough that could generate

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increased notoriety for the film and its star.

“This could really just be the beginning for Joe,” he said.

But that’s the question — was this Belknap’s 15 minutes of fame or will he return to the movie set?

“If Joe can find the time, we all want to work with him again,” Pata said.

Belknap said he’s not looking for another role, but then again, he wasn’t looking for his first one.

“All of this just came out of the blue,” he said. “I wasn’t looking for an opportunity like this; never imagined I’d have one, but it turned out to be an extremely rewarding experience.”

Image Information: JOE BELKNAP in his classroom at Port Washington High School and on the set of “Dead Weight.”