

# Devastating loss and a glimmer of hope

'Dear Zachary,' Kurt Kuenne's intimate tribute to a murdered friend, gains a wider audience at Slamdance

BY DAVID BURGER  
The Salt Lake Tribune

What began as a simple tribute to a murdered friend, meant to be distributed to loved ones only, made its appearance at the Slamdance Film Festival this week as "Dear Zachary."

"Right after he was killed, I thought of doing a video tribute and giving it to family and friends," said filmmaker Kurt Kuenne of his friend Andrew Bagby, a 28-year-old found murdered in a Pennsylvania park in 2001. "I conceived it as part of my grief process."

Then Kuenne learned that the prime suspect in the case, Bagby's ex-girlfriend Shirley Turner, was pregnant with Bagby's child, later to be



Boyhood friends Kurt Kuenne, left, and Andrew Bagby in 1981.

named Zachary.

The gestating tribute was then meant for Zachary: "It was the only way he could see his dad and see him talk," Kuenne said in a telephone interview.

But what began as a way for a boy to learn about his dead father became a full-length film when Turner fled to Canada and killed again. To say more would give away too

much.

Kuenne knew he was the only one who could tell this story. Bagby, his childhood best friend, was the star of all of Kuenne's earliest films. Made when the two were young boys, images from those early films are included in Kuenne's documentary.

The documentary had its first public showing on Jan. 19, and Bagby's parents,

David and Kate Bagby, were in the audience. David wrote a best-selling book, *Dance With the Devil*, about his son, grandson and the red tape-laden legal system in Canada that allowed Turner to roam free while awaiting extradition to the United States.

Kate said the documentary was "overwhelming" in accurately showing "the depth of the horror" of their experience.

Slamdance officials were similarly impressed with what Kuenne created.

"This documentary will rip out your heart and leave you in the snow without a sweater," said Slamdance programmer Sarah Diamond. "But afterwards, all wounded and broken down, you will see the power of the human spirit even in the face of the darkest of souls."

Peter Baxter, president and co-founder of Slamdance, said the documentary "demonstrates independent film at its

finest. . . . It's a type of documentary that typifies our kind of personal, human stories that are not conventional."

The film will be screened later this year at the Cinequest-San Jose Film Festival and at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas.

Many filmmakers bring movies to be screened in Park City hoping they'll be purchased by a distributor, and Kuenne said there has been "a

lot of rumbling" from interested parties.

But he said his dream was realized when he brought David and Kate with him to the front of the theater after the house lights came on. The audience stood up and cheered for the parents, Kuenne said.

► **DAVID BURGER** can be reached at [dburger@sltrib.com](mailto:dburger@sltrib.com) or 801-257-8620. Send comments to [livingeditor@sltrib.com](mailto:livingeditor@sltrib.com).

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