

# Hot Docs Review: Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father

by **Monika Bartyzel** Apr 30th 2008 // 4:04PM

We always champion the documentaries that do their best to separate emotion from filmmaking. While we recognize that a documentary can never be completely unbiased, we praise the films in which a hard-hitting subject can resonate without the director's emotions overtly influencing the portrayal. But I would argue that sometimes that skewed perspective is not only necessary, but required. With *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father*, Kurt Kuenne bares his heart and soul. He shows his biased and emotional viewpoint, and that pulls the film out of the realms of the normal documentary and into something infinitely more memorable and inspiring.

*\*Note: Readers have commented that IMDb has spoilers, so check it out at your own risk!*

As [Erik Davis noted](#) in his review earlier this year from Slamdance, *Dear Zachary* is a film to go into with as little knowledge of the story as possible, so like him, I'm continuing the review after the jump. That being said, what follows definitely isn't a spoilerfest. I will remain tight-lipped on many of the twists and turns that the film takes, so if you don't mind learning the basic story, continue on.

In 2001, Andrew Bagby, a promising up-and-coming doctor, a man who had deeply and positively influenced the lives of many, was murdered. After his death, his life-long best friend Kurt Kuenne, who had made piles of movies with Andrew as they grew up, was surprised to learn that Andrew had an interest in photography. He began to wonder how many other things he had never known, and in an immense act of friendship, Kurt decided to travel across the country, as well as to Europe and Canada, to talk to all of Andrew's friends and family, learn all that he could about him, and make one last movie with his fallen friend.

However, what started out as a simple document to his murdered friend quickly became so very much more. As Kurt meets and befriends those Andrew touched, and searches for all the little details that he never knew, Andrew's murder case takes a number of haunting turns. Soon, the film becomes a journey not for Kurt, but for Andrew's son, Zachary, as Andrew's friends and family fight for justice.

The story is hard-hitting and heart-wrenching, but the real magic is how Kuenne portrays his journey. With piles of interviews, old home movies, and media segments, there is an immense amount of footage to choose from. Kuenne expertly edits it into the most dramatic rollercoaster of emotions that I have ever seen. He brings you up, then quickly sinks you down; you feel every subtle emotion and are then smacked by the intense ones. Through quick editing,

Kuenne introduces you to a myriad of people who love and miss Andrew, but surprisingly, the sea of faces doesn't weigh you down with the confusion of keeping people straight. He manages to share their thoughts and stories about Andrew in a clear and easy-to-understand manner.

Because Kuenne includes his own bias and emotions, you don't just view what's happening on the screen -- you live it through every gasp and every tear, and every bit of exasperated anger, of which there are many. It is necessary for this story. Kuenne wants you to be touched, to be sad, and to get angry. It's not hard to spot when his feelings lead to bias, but it's also not hard to see the facts underneath. Sure, Kuenne could have made a solid film without the passion, but then it wouldn't be a document that hits you on so many levels. We're not supposed to receive the facts in a removed manner -- that would lead to indifference, to experiencing the documentary and moving on. We are forced to walk down the path with Kurt and Andrew's other friends and family, and be forever changed as they are.

*Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father* is a deeply personal story, and a labor of love. Kurt Kuenne took this upon himself, and put this together on his own, which makes this film even more astonishing. It is so very worth the time and effort.

But I must be clear. This isn't just a movie of sadness. It's not just an emotional and personal film made by an indie filmmaker. It is an essential story of hope, determination, and strength. *Dear Zachary* will move you. It will make you question your faith in the world. But it will also introduce you to some of the most inspiring, strong, and caring people to ever grace the big screen.

*For those who are familiar with the story and want to learn more, go [here](#). For the rest, I recommend seeing the film before visiting the website.*