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## Indie Film Festival Makes its Mark in Moraga

By Andrea A. Firth



Moviegoers packed the lobby of the New Rheem Theater at the Friday night opening reception of the 13th Annual California Independent Film Festival (CAIFF). Locals stood shoulder-to-shoulder nibbling hors d'oeuvres and sipping wine from the vineyards of Moraga winegrowers Sal and Susan Captain as they waited for the start of the evening's sold-out feature film, *The 5th Quarter*. The excitement was palpable and attendees jostled for the best viewing spots as the Festival's Program Director Beau Behan introduced the film's writer, director, and producer Rick Bieber and leading actor Ryan Merriman. The audience applauded as Bieber and the 27-year old Merriman placed their signatures on the tiled wall in the lobby-Moraga's newly-designated Wall of Fame.

*The 5th Quarter*, based on the true story of the Abbate family whose teenage son Luke was killed in a reckless driving accident, struck an emotional chord with many residents. Bieber spent several months with the family to learn about their story of loss and understand their journey to recovery. "Writing the screenplay went quickly, but it was emotional for me just to write it down," said Bieber.

Opening Night of the film festival drew a large crowd to the New Rheem Theatre Photos Doug Kohen

of Luke's older brother Jon who dedicated his football season at Wake Forest to Luke's memory and helped lead the Demon Deacons to a school-record of 11 victories and first-ever Orange Bowl berth. More than a tragedy to triumph sports tale, the inspirational story recounts the Abbates' decision to donate their son's organs which were given to five recipients, including his heart which saved the life of a young woman with the same uncommon blood type.

At Sunday's Slate Awards, *The 5th Quarter* won for Best Music Score, and Merriman picked up the prize for Best Actor. "It's an amazing story. It changed me," said Merriman, who still keeps in touch with the family.

The second feature of the evening was the independent film *Fanny, Annie & Danny*, which contained all the classic elements of independent filmmaking: a story that grabs you and challenges you, characters you care about or love to hate, and exceptional acting, performances that stick with you. Over the course of a disastrous holiday dinner, writer and director Chris Brown deftly tells the story of a dysfunctional family that has grown apart and weary of each other's needs. Brown's wife, actress Jill Pixley, plays Fanny, a disabled adult with obsessive-compulsive tendencies who tries desperately to survive within a family nucleus that is about to implode. At times painful to watch, viewers were simultaneously captivated and disturbed by the honesty of the characters and realness of the subject matter.

"That's what indie films are all about-to move you and to make you think," said Derek Zemrak, President and Founder of the CAIFF in his comments to the crowd at the program kick off.

If you haven't had a chance to visit what Zemrak is already lauding as the most successful California Independent Film Festival ever, it's not too late. Tonight (Wednesday) there will be screenings of the documentaries *Crimebuster: A Son's Search for his Father*, and *Beyond the Wall*. There will be a closing reception on Thursday followed by the Winning Shorts Showcase, and Diamond Award actress Lea Thomson will be there with her film, *Mayor Cupcake*.

For more information go to [www.caiff.org](http://www.caiff.org).

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