

Courier Post

LOCAL

Magnolia filmmaker will compete in multiple categories at film festival in France



Jim Walsh

Cherry Hill Courier-Post

Published 4:43 a.m. ET May 9, 2024 | Updated 8:29 p.m. ET May 9, 2024

MAGNOLIA — Lary Campbell's love of filmmaking began with a prize, when he won an amateur movie camera as a kid on Atlantic City's Boardwalk.

Now 68, Campbell's hoping for even bigger rewards with nominations for his latest work at an upcoming film festival in France.

But his current success follows a long intermission for Campbell, who largely left the performing arts to be a nurse for 42 years.

"I returned to acting recently," said the Magnolia man, who retired from health care in December 2019.

Performer from Burlington City: This South Jersey actor appeared in 'Law & Order: Organized Crime.' Who is he?

In his three-minute film, "My Mother, My Self," Campbell recalls a dramatic — and heart-breaking — moment from 1991, when he told his mother he was HIV-positive.

Magnolia filmmaker does it all

Campbell was the writer, sole performer and director for the film, which he created in his home.

"It was very difficult because it was true," he says of the production.

And while Campbell delivers his lines in a single take, it took 24 tries to nail the powerful monologue.

“In fact, on the 23rd time, I couldn’t get a tear out,” he recalled. “I had to drink a bunch of water.”

Campbell’s cinematic success comes after a life with elements of both comedy and tragedy.

As a boy with a Super 8 camera, he and a friend made movies based on “Dark Shadows,” a soap opera that drew a young audience with a vampire and other spooky characters.

“It was fun,” he said of the films, made when he was 10 to 15 years old. “We got kicked out of a graveyard because we were banging on a mausoleum door.”

Campbell went on to make a pioneering version of music videos, scripting stories to accompany tunes “way before MTV and all that stuff.”

The Philadelphia native sang in a spring musical at his high school. And after graduation in 1974, he landed a gig in summer stock at the Surflight Theatre in Beach Haven.

“I knew I wanted to be an actor after high school,” said Campbell.

But a fledgling actor can’t survive on fleeting roles.

“I said to the unemployment office, ‘What goes with acting?’ I was a smart-ass,” he recalls.

“They said, ‘You could become a nurse because you can pick it up and put it down.’”

Campbell then pursued an acting career, while also taking jobs in nursing — first as a licensed practical nurse and then as a registered nurse.

A dramatic change came when the AIDS epidemic began killing gay men and others across the country in 1981.

Campbell realized his nursing skills, and not his acting dreams, were far more important for a community in crisis.

“I’ll give up my goals, or at least defer them,” said Campbell, who took a position treating AIDS patients at a Manhattan hospital.

“I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do it,” he said, while noting his decision caused some people to shun him due to the widespread fear of AIDS.

Campbell later took on other intensive assignments, nursing children with leukemia in Los Angeles, for instance, and people in crisis at a psychiatric emergency department in Philadelphia.

He continued his education throughout his career, earning a bachelor's degree in nursing at age 60.

Filmmaker heads to France

That was followed by a certificate in LGBT health care, allowing him to teach other medical professionals how to deal with patients with varied orientations.

“My Mother, My Self” is up for five awards, including best short film, at the Nice International Film Festival, where it will screen on May 14.

Campbell's also under consideration at Nice for best director and outstanding actor, as well as for best original screenplay and best editing.

All of his nominations are in the short film category.

The film's already been named best short form short film at The Toronto LGBTQ+ Film Festival in May 2023.

And Campbell also won an acting award for excellence from last year's online LGBTQ Unbordered International Film Festival.

The acting and directing nominations mean the most, Campbell said.

Leaving the stage decades ago “was a crisis for me because I really thought all my life I was meant to be an actor.”

Now, each award and nomination “confirms the feeling I had,” he continued.

“I can act.”

Jim Walsh is a senior reporter with the Courier-Post, Burlington County Times and The Daily Journal. Email: Jwalsh@cpsj.com.

