

Local man is (screen)writing his own success

By Matt Godfrey

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The film industry is risky business.

One second you can be on top of the world, the next you are old news.

Thousands of faces flock to the City of Angels each year with aspirations to become the “next big thing,” but end up becoming nothing more than the “next best bartender” or the “next best burger-flipper.”

But one thing stays constant year after year — talent makes the film world turn.

That’s why last month a lady named Rhonda Bloom decided that a kid from Kensington had to be accepted by her boutique management company, Plumeria Entertainment, based in Los Angeles.

Bloom started Plumeria about five years ago, its mission to cultivate raw talent and mold those clients into well-rounded, refined writers and directors who would thrive in the film industry.

She has only about 10 people on her client list, and, as the only manager in the company, prefers to keep it that way.

So when this Kensington native, who now lives in Tacoma, Wash., sent Bloom a script, she knew she had a decision to make.

“I could see there was a real voice in Joe’s writing,”

PHOTO COURTESY JOE NIENALT
Nienalt’s three years in screenwriting have been fruitful so far.



Bloom explained. “He also had won a festival, which is a lot different than most people who contact me.”

She is talking about Joe Nienalt, who grew up on East Albricht Street not far from the Heitzman Playground.

Nienalt contacted Bloom after seeing the latest movie by Sidney Lumet, *Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead*.

Nienalt had representation with a bigger company at the time but felt he could do better.

“I researched the writer of the movie after I had seen it because I felt like it was right up my alley content-wise,” Nienalt explained.

“Nothing (in life) has ever been handed to me, and I know (a writing career) is not going to be handed to me either,” he explained.

He found out the Lumet movie was written by a guy named Kelly Masterson, who is on Bloom’s short list of clients.

A few e-mails and phone calls later, Nienalt is on that short list too.

He got his start early, when he was a student at North Catholic High School.

“I started when I was 16. I was big into the psychedelic experience. I listened to a lot of Jim Morrison and The Doors,” Nienalt said. “I started writing a darker kind of poetry and realized I enjoyed doing it. That mushroomed into short stories and ultimately into screenplays.”

Since he lived in the river wards, Nienalt explained, there was never a shortage of subject matter.

In a letter accompanying his 2006 application to the Sundance Institute’s feature-film program, a writing program to develop screenplay ideas, Joe wrote:

“Seven years ago, just before 1999 turned to 2000, I had a gun put to my head in Philadelphia. The guy that did it used to be the second baseman for my T-ball team. He scored the winning goal to send my sixth-grade soccer team to the state finals. We started calling him Beanhead.”

Nienalt goes on to explain how Beanhead accused him of scaling a wall to steal a stash of drugs and money from a safe that Nienalt claims he had no idea even existed.

All through the ordeal, Nienalt said, the one thing going through his mind was, “Man, I need to write about this some day.”

That incident led him to leave the city and enlist in the U.S. Army in 1999.

Two years later, just weeks before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, he was honorably discharged and moved to Washington State.

Nienalt’s venture in the screen trade began a few years later, in 2005, after a friend read a novel he’d written.

“I co-wrote *Testament* (first script) with a buddy from work who had read my novel and encouraged me to direct my creative energies toward



PHOTO COURTESY JOE NIENALT
Joe stands in front of a Greater Philadelphia Film Office sign last year after winning the Set In Philadelphia screenwriting competition.

screenwriting,” Nienalt explained via e-mail.

“That was in April 2005. I had won the Writer’s Arc (screenwriting fellowship) and was in L.A. by September 2005, and it’s been one-thousand miles an hour ever since.”

The Writer’s Arc Screenwriting Fellowship is basically an intensive course on writing and developing an already-existing script.

Since then Nienalt has written a handful of other scripts, all based on his hometown.

Success has been building lately.

In 2007, Nienalt entered a screenwriting competition called *Set in Philadelphia*, sponsored by the Philadelphia Film Office. The contest offers a hefty cash prize as well as film industry contacts and script critiques.

The main stipulation of the contest is that the majority of an applicant’s story must take place in Philadelphia.

Nienalt’s entry, entitled *Smile* (since renamed *Unbroken*), walked away with the top prize and gave him a certain level of credibility that caught the attention of Bloom, now his manager.

Nienalt lives with his wife Shevonne and three children, Amari, Allia, and Gabriel, in Tacoma. His family still lives in Philadelphia and, as he explained, supports his writing endeavors.

“I know I’ll have bigger successes in my life,” he said in an e-mail, “but the *Set in Philly* thing was very special because I got to share it with my family.” ●●