

THE UNIT PUBLICIST

Fun and Frustration in the Trenches of Movie Making

The work of the unit publicist is the least understood and probably the most important in the entertainment publicity field. These are the frontline troops. Their work is the basis of all that follows, all the way to a film's release and beyond or a TV show's debut and succeeding seasons.

It's a job that can be fun and stressful, exciting and tedious. The unit publicist is the keeper of the secrets and guardian of the gate on location. And like any freelance job, the future is uncertain.

We asked a few unit publicists to send us some anecdotes that illustrate the world they work in. Here are their answers.



WOLF SCHNEIDER

Unit Publicist

Wolf Schneider in Albuquerque, New Mexico, setting up an EPK shot for Sicario, starring Emily Blunt, Josh Brolin and Benicio Del Toro.

Photo: Gary Marsh



I've huddled under an actor's trailer overhang for hours in a blizzard, watching the snow mount as I waited for him to do his phone interview with Entertainment Weekly and wouldn't abandon hope (he finally did it!); realized texting service works better than emailing when filming at New Mexico's prisons; encountered rattlesnakes

in search of a good EPK location; explained countless times what spoilers are and why they shouldn't be posted on Twitter or Facebook; discovered Harley-Davidson has the coolest protective goggles for surviving sandstorms (and the least expensive), realized helpful producers and ADs are gods when it comes to wrangling talent for EPK

and press visits (a bottle of red wine is great for thanks); made much use of mic dictation on the iPhone 6; come to treasure unit photographers who are willing to collaborate; bought countless Merrells (most comfortable set shoe); sampled all sleeping aids (Calms

Forte trumps melatonin but you must take at least three pills); and decided that being communicative, positive, friendly, and hard-working is the best way to get the unit publicist's job accomplished...and a sense of humor helps too!"



CLAIRE S. RASKIND

Unit Publicist

We are the liaison of the production to the outside world, collaborating intensely with the studio and the filmmakers.

Okay, so the number of my unit publicist film credits is now close to my age. I can't decide if that is good or bad.

It has been an amazing job. Career. Life style. Life on the road.

We unit publicists are a unique part of the film crew core. We are the only below-the-line worker bees whose job is undefined. We don't lock our work truck at wrap. That would be too easy.

We are the liaison of the production to the outside world, collaborating intensely with the studio and the filmmakers. We covertly write the behind-the-scenes of the

production, and often we feel like we are journalists on set with exclusive access. We create an essential archive needed for the theatrical release, working closely with the still photographer and videographer. It's raw and real.

Often the media are just waiting for controversy or a mistake to be made on a film set, and we are armed and ready for them. We find our rhythm to build and nurture via Vine, Snapchat, Reddit, Twitter, FB and whatever else is the flavor of the month.

Then it's game on. Throughout filming we host guests from press to politicians,

Continued on page 106

Continued from page 105

giving them a tour of our gypsy workplace. We unit publicists take pride in being quick responders. We try to tame and track the trends. So please excuse us on set if we are texting away in the corner during a take.

We meet a few hundred new people every time we start a film. You can pick your confidantes within the first five minutes. Your common sense of when to ask and when not to ask is key. We unit publicists get caught in the middle often and have to continue to plow ahead with no agenda.

Sure, being a unit publicist is not brain surgery but it takes brains. We hope it is a comfort to studio publicists to have a Local 600 unit publicist be their eyes and ears on set. That way they can focus more on getting butts in seats for their next theatrical release.

Night shoots in the freezing cold. Day shoots in the extreme heat and humidity. Stunts galore. Face time with home. Sleeping like a rock. The hundreds of crew members who

come together to create something wonderful... well hopefully it will be wonderful. This chemistry of those individuals only happens once.

As I write this it is our lunch break, far from where I live, loved ones, comforts and familiarity... yet I am completely at home. The common goal of a film set is to get it done; with a work ethic and work pace that is both motivating, electric and rare to find.

Every job I get I consider a miracle. The competition is stiff, and each individual unit publicist has so much to offer. Wherever I am in the world working, often there is that quiet moment on set... where you take a moment to look around and just listen. In these moments I realize how lucky I am to be privy to such a creative and unusual work environment, and I wouldn't trade this life for the world.

So please visit me in my old age when I hope to live with my husband, whom of course I met on a film set, in the Motion Picture Home in the hills of Los Angeles and we can swap stories.



Photo: Frank Masi

Ernie Malik (left) on the set of *We Are Marshall* (2006) with Matthew McConaughey.



ERNIE MALIK

Unit Publicist

When directory editor Leonard Morpurgo approached me about contributing an anecdotal piece for this year's issue, he mentioned a theme he was pursuing -- part of a unit publicist's job on location is as a "guardian of the gate."

Having worked on three true-life football movies in my career (*My All American*, *We Are Marshall*, *Friday Night Lights*), I might refer to myself as "guardian of the gridiron" as the location publicity coordinator in each of these

three unique situations, where we became front page news as production unfolded.

All three of these projects were filmed in part on the locations in which the actual stories occurred. *My All American* (2015), the tragic, true tale of 1960s University of Texas footballer Freddie Steinmark, filmed mostly in Texas' capital of Austin, where the scrappy player excelled for the UT Longhorns before cancer took his left leg at the end of the 1969 season. Many of Steinmark's actual teammates from that squad 45 years ago visited our set during production.

The production of *We Are Marshall* (2006), another story of misfortune set a year after the Steinmark saga, spent its first month on location on the campus of Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. While recreating the tragic events of a fiery plane crash that claimed the lives of most of the school's gridiron squad in November, 1970, the company coddled those locals who

Continued on page 108

Continued from page 107

lost loved ones 36 years before who were still living in Huntington; just as the townspeople there welcomed the filmmakers without any suspicions of how Hollywood would portray this devastating chapter in the school's history and the lives of the victims' families affected by the catastrophe.

Such was not the case on *Friday Night Lights*, the 2004 big screen adaptation of Buzz Bissinger's memorable chronicle of Odessa, Texas high school football. Suspicions about the incoming production consumed the town like an infection in a hospital ward. Our job during the film company's three-week location shoot there was to prevent a viral outbreak that could potentially poison our image to the locals.

This West Texas hamlet was where the author himself lived for an entire season (1988) documenting not only the exploits of a handful of Permian High School players, but Odessa itself. The townsfolk had cradled the esteemed author like adoptive parents of a newborn child, opening their homes and their hearts during his yearlong odyssey to this cradle of high school football fanaticism - only to feel betrayed once they all read the book.

On any location shoot, especially one involving real life stories and those who endured the actual circumstances, a location publicist, the film's spokesperson, is more an ambassador or diplomat than he/she is a promoter. One way to build a solid profile for the film company is through the local media. In a quest to establish a trusting relationship between the filmmakers and the locals while hoping to convince our hosts that the production is approaching the story and events with the reverence and accuracy they deserve.

That was the challenge of working in Odessa on *Friday Night Lights* back in March of 2004. The film went before the cameras fourteen years after Bissinger's book hit the

bestseller list. Upon its 1990 publication, Odessans despised its depiction of their West Texas football capital because of the author's critical portrait of the town's social, racial and economic issues. While Bissinger's book accurately and lovingly portrays the town's fanatical football culture, what he uncovered behind the scenes made for equally compelling reading. Just not to the locals.

While filming proceeded in Austin, where the production's first five weeks (of a ten-week schedule) were mounted by director Peter Berg, discussions ensued among a handful of folks on the set (myself included) and studio execs back at Universal's Hollywood headquarters about what the reception could be upon production's arrival in Odessa, and how we might temper that through the media.

Upon my arrival in Odessa two days before filming commenced at Ratliff Stadium, which played itself in Berg's movie, I met with a local newspaper reporter assigned to cover the production during our three weeks in town. His name was Cliff Hamilton, and he wanted to come to the set every day during our 22 days on location.

Normally, a movie production spending a short time in such a locale would set aside one day and invite local media to set to file news stories about the production. Any movie filming in a small town environment is undoubtedly front page news. Hamilton wanted us to adorn Page One of the *Odessa American* each and every day during our stay in town.

I agreed to host Hamilton on-set every day (with the approval of both the studio and the filmmakers), thus avoiding something I call the "stiff arm" syndrome. I've always felt it best to be proactive with local media. Call them and introduce yourself before they seek you out. Make them feel a part of the experience. Besides, had I not agreed to this

reporter's polite request, would Hamilton have sought stories elsewhere in town that might have proved detrimental to the production?

While having him with me daily on the movie sidelines I felt that our continued cooperation would reinforce my hopes that he would not file stories with a negative bent to them.

I hosted Hamilton and the town's three local TV stations on set on our very first shoot day in Odessa. Given the anticipation of our arrival in town, I would not have been able to keep the press away had we padlocked the stadium doors with the impenetrable steel of a Fort Knox vault. So I chose to invite them all to the set that first shoot day.

After they departed to file their stories, I approached our executive producer, a veteran named John Cameron, with an idea that we hoped would immediately solidify relations between the town and the movie and ease any apprehensions the studio (and local townsfolk) might be feeling.

We were making a film about football. Why not have production throw a tailgate party for Odessa's mayor and 200 of his friends and coworkers the very next day, a Friday, when shooting concluded around 6:30 pm? After all,

the movie was called "Friday Night Lights." How about a Friday night barbecue under those stadium lights!

Once I had Cameron's approval, I mentioned the idea to star Billy Bob Thornton, one of the industry's most gracious personalities. He readily agreed to stick around once filming had wrapped for the day. Along with Hamilton and his staff photographer, we also invited the same TV outlets to cover the "party," at which some of the actual 1988 Permian players were also present.

Upon awakening on Saturday morning, Hamilton's front page story (his third of the 19 banner headlines he filed over 22 days, all positive coverage, by-the-way) was a love letter to its readers about the production.

What could have easily been a battleground became that friendly playground we sought during our remaining weeks in Odessa. I continued hosting reporter Hamilton on the set, where he became an honorary crew member. And Hollywood, initially skeptical about what to expect out in West Texas, where high school football is a religion, was welcomed as a new member of Odessa's parish by its longtime parishioners and gridiron worshippers.

