

ACTION!

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REEL East Texas Film Festival rolls out the red carpet

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Chip Hale started his dream of making independent films in Hollywood. It was more than a decade before he realized his star actually shone the brightest back home in Kilgore, Texas.

“I moved back to East Texas after 11 years in Los Angeles to make a film about the Kilgore Rangerettes,” says Hale, an Overton native and founder and director of the REEL East Texas Film Festival in Kilgore. “I had every intention to move back to L.A., but the strangest thing happened — I kept getting work here.”

Although it seemed a little crazy for Hale to stay in a small town in Texas for a filmmaking career, it also felt like the right thing to do. “I kept thinking that if I went back to L.A. I’d probably have to manage a restaurant or work in retail,” he says. “Making movies there would be a part-time thing, and I knew it wouldn’t make me happy.”

Today, Hale is in his fifth year as director of Kilgore’s REEL East Texas Film Festival, an annual event that showcases independent films from all over the world. “Staying was probably one of the top three best decisions of my life,” he says.

A FESTIVAL IS BORN

Hale came up with the idea for REEL when his own documentary, “Sweethearts of the Gridiron: An American Story,” played in film festivals all over the world. The documentary


recounts the history and present-day trials and triumphs of Kilgore College’s famous drill team.

“In 2015 and 2016, it had a really good festival run,” he says. “Around the same time, I was becoming actively involved in Kilgore. I volunteered on different committees and at different events. I got involved in the local food pantry and Habitat for Humanity. I made friends with other people who wanted to make Kilgore a great place to live and visit.”


Putting the two interests together, he founded REEL, which held its first festival in 2017 at the Texan Theater and the Old U.S. Post Office, both of which are 1930s-era buildings on South Kilgore Street that now serve as event venues. “It’s been an interesting ride,” says Hale, who also helps manage and book events at the two venues. “I love how the community has come together around this. It’s been a very harmonious team effort.”

SPOTLIGHTING EAST TEXAS


He also gets to show off his adopted hometown as a potential spot for movie magic. The Texas Film Commission lists Kilgore as a Film Friendly Certified Community, which means movie makers from all over the world can access information on everything the city has to offer in the way of locations, available local crews and other amenities. “We really try to promote Kilgore,” Hale says. “We want Hollywood to know how easy it is to make a movie here.”



Texan Theater also serves as an events venue when it's not hosting filmmakers.



Chip Hale and his daughter stand outside Texan Theater in Kilgore, where the REEL East Texas Film Festival shows many of its independent movies in November.



The lounge area at the Old U.S. Post Office in Kilgore gives filmmakers a chance to network and relax during the festival.



GETTING REEL

The Reel East Texas Film Festival runs Nov. 5-13 at the Texan Theater and the Old U.S. Post Office in Kilgore. Visit realeasttexas.com to find out more about the festival, summer workshops for high school filmmakers and to book an event at one of the venues. Follow the latest information about the festival on its Facebook and Instagram pages.

The city rolls out the red carpet for the annual event, too. Restaurants and businesses welcome the filmmakers and their audiences, and most of the locals appreciate the festival's focus on arts and entertainment. "Kilgore is unique," Hale says. "For it to be rural, there's an appreciation for creativity. The prestigious Texas Shakespeare Festival takes place here, and people here are very proud of it."

A BRIGHT FUTURE

The film festival continues to grow every year, despite the setbacks it experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Right now, we're fairly small," Hale says. "We usually get about 200 submissions a year, and we only take about 50 to 60 a year. But I do have grandiose plans."

Some of those plans involve the festival "growing its footprint," which, on a practical level, means using more of

the town's vacant buildings to show even more films and hold more film-related events. Hale imagines a mini-Sundance Film Festival — without the ski resort, of course. "Obviously, we aren't a resort town," he says. "But if you look at how Sundance is laid out, it mostly takes place along a main thoroughfare in Park City, Utah. There are a few main theaters along the street, and then there are all these restaurants and bars."

Hale holds hope it could happen, too, especially since Texas and its film industry are healthy and growing. "We're attracting more Fortune 500 companies daily," he says. "They're leaving California and New York to come here, and so are the people. The state's film industry is thriving, and we haven't even hit our peak yet." 🗨️

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— Chip Hale, Director of REEL East Texas Film Festival



Chip Hale, director of the REEL East Texas Film Festival in Kilgore, with his daughter. Hale founded the festival after spending years in Los Angeles pursuing a dream of becoming an independent filmmaker.

