

Hollywood comes to McFarland: Farming town plays big role in Disney movie

By Rick Bentley



When former McFarland High School cross country coach Jim White — whose state-championship teams are the inspiration for the Disney movie “McFarland, USA” — popped in at his old school on the eve of the premiere, he got star treatment. Here he signs an autograph for Cougars senior center Imani Brookins during a break from basketball practice. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

Before Jim White arrived in McFarland in 1987, the city that straddles Highway 99 in northern Kern County was known for massive farms.

White turned seven young men into state high school cross country champions and gave the community another claim to fame, one the city is proud to own. Now the story of White and his motley crew of runners serves as the basis for the new Disney film “McFarland, USA,” which opens Friday, Feb. 20, in theaters.

McFarland Mayor Manuel Cantu Jr. is excited that the film is shining such a positive light on the community of just over 13,500.

“The last time we got attention from the international media was in the early ’80s because of the cancer cluster,” Cantu says, referencing the rash of childhood diseases blamed on pesticides (never proved) that brought the Rev. Jesse Jackson to town twice during his 1988 presidential campaign.

“This movie will show the rest of the world that McFarland is a great place to live and we have a lot of great people

here,” Cantu says.

Several of those “great people” are members of that original state championship team, who, after going to college, returned to the area to live. That includes Fresno State graduate Danny Diaz, who is a counselor at McFarland High School.

The movie has already had an impact on the city, where scenes were shot in fall 2013. The film crew pumped money into the local economy through fees and the use of local vendors and businesses. Filming also was done in Pasadena and Los Angeles.

“I would have shot every single frame there, but economics dictated we could only shoot there for 11 days. So we worked very, very hard to make sure that everywhere else we shot looked like McFarland,” says director Niki Caro, a New Zealander whose previous work includes the films “North Country” and “Whale Rider.” “The critical locations — the school, the market, the restaurant — that’s all McFarland. They run past the prison. Obviously the fields.”

Caro wanted the film to feel culturally and visually authentic.

“To see those beautiful young people, they are backlit because the sun is going down and they are kicking up the dust off their heels, it’s so romantic, so cinematic, so true,” she says.

To help make the film as authentic as possible, plans to knock down the school’s football stadium where the cross country program was born were delayed until after the filming.

And even though shooting was done in October and November, Caro says she wanted to correctly represent the San Joaquin Valley summer heat that she experienced during pre-shoot preparations: “One thing we tried to bring through with the cinematography is that it’s so hot that it bleaches all the color out. You don’t even get a blue sky. It’s like it burns away. We paid so much attention to trying to get that feeling.”

Caro says the community opened its doors to her after a weird introduction.

“The first time I went there, I couldn’t believe it. The town itself — in the middle of the day — nobody is there because everybody is working. And then the sun goes down, and it gets a little cooler and I started seeing the kids coming out running,” Caro says.

The one thing she noted was how much love and pride people have for the community and the school’s accomplishments. Her initial instinct was she could make something beautiful out of the struggle of their lives and their inspirational message.

The film focuses on when the team was formed and begins to work toward a state title. White, who still lives in McFarland, says the story only grows bigger after that season.

“Our town is really changing,” White says. “They’ve really picked up this thing with cross country so much so that we now have a new city logo. ... it now has a silhouette of a runner running through the field.”

The film gave White a chance to look back at that first team. When asked who got more out of the launch of cross country at McFarland, White says it was equal between the team and himself. Their success came from having a good attitude.

“That is the only thing that you can control. I can’t control other feelings about me. The most important thing for me to transfer to these kids is the attitude of hard work that can transfer into the classroom, and into your jobs, and into their real lives,” White says. “It’s how we let the problems affect our lives that’s the main thing, that’ll get you down.”

His only complaint about the movie is that it doesn’t completely show the support he and the team got from his wife, Cheryl. Oh, and that Clint Eastwood didn’t play him in the movie. A lot of his students have called him Clint over the

years.

Caro understands why White would think of Eastwood: He looks a little like the actor/director. But Eastwood was too old for the role; Caro needed to find someone with the power and strength of the coach. The role went to Kevin Costner.

“The bar was set pretty high to find a phenomenal man to play him. Costner is perfect. No one has a better pedigree in sports drama than Costner,” Caro says.

Calling the movie “McFarland, USA” is more than just a bit of geographical help.

“It’s a tiny town with a Scottish name that no one’s ever heard of. Because of our commitment to authenticity and specificity, I was going to fight like a rat in the corner to call that movie ‘McFarland,’ ” Caro says. “Calling it ‘McFarland, USA’ anchors it to this country. But it also reminds us this is a very American story and — like it says on the poster — champions can come from anywhere.”

Contact Rick Bentley: rbentley@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6355 or [@RickBentley1](https://twitter.com/RickBentley1) on Twitter.