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A President, an Actor and a Paperboy’s Dream

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By Sean McNamara

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If you had visited my house when I was a kid, chances are you would have noticed my mother's Infant Jesus of Prague statue as well as tributes to the Pope and President John F. Kennedy. Yes, we were *that* household. My devoutly Catholic mother instilled a love for both men—and for us, as Irish Catholics of that era, being a Democrat was like breathing. It was assumed. So how did I become the director of a biopic about a Republican president, Ronald Reagan? As you might guess, there's a story behind that.

Before I ever signed on to direct this movie, one of my heroes, John G. Avildsen, the famed director of "Paper Moon," handed me the baton as about the politics like the backdrop for the case of I this movie.

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Truth is, I'm not really a political guy at all these days, but I do know a great story when I see one. As a film director for more than 30 years, I've been able to tell a lot of stories about many interesting people: immigrants who wanted to become American citizens (Spare Parts), boys who wanted to be rock stars (Mighty Oak) and girls who overcame great tragedies (Soul Surfer) and died doing the things they loved (The Miracle Season).

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President Ronald Reagan makes a stump speech in front of a large American flag. | Wally McNamee/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images/Wally McNamee/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images

But before any of that, I grew up (as the youngest of six) in beautiful downtown Burbank, California, home of The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson. Everything made sense in my hometown. The White House was just over the LA river. It had white colonial columns. I later found out that that was actually Forest Lawn Mortuary. The end of the world must have been on the other side of the huge hill that had the radio tower on the top. A Thanksgiving Day tradition of our family was to climb that hill. One day we made it to the top and I looked over it. From my point of view there was a whole other world with a sign: DOOWYLLOH. It beckoned me. HOLLYWOOD. On the hike down, I began to dream. I dreamed of

I was a paperboy
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I attended Loyola High School in Los Angeles with Marty Pasetta Jr., whose dad directed the Academy awards ceremony for 17 years. One day during my senior year I casually asked Marty to get me a meeting so I could get a job in "the business." Finally, after I had graduated and headed to Loyola Marymount University to study film, I was granted a five-minute interview with Mr. Pasetta. I was shown into his amazing Beverly Hills office and was blown away by framed pictures on the walls of him with various celebrities of the time. He was finishing a call with Bob Hope as I was seated before him.

He asked "so what do ya do, kid?" A question I was utterly unprepared for. So I nervously answered with the first thing that popped into my vacant 18-year-old brain. "I'm in a band. I plug in microphones..."

"Audio! That's for you kid!" he bellowed and proceeded to get on the phone and call his buddy at BEST AUDIO to give me a job on their next project.

He hung up the phone. "You free during semester break?"

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"Sure am!" I replied.

"It's the Inauguration, you know, and all the parties and balls," he said.

"Okay?!" I answered, pretending to know what he was talking about. Marty then hired me as a sound assistant to work President Reagan's inaugural ceremony in January of 1981 in Washington D.C. I had no idea then that my first professional gig would prepare me for the most challenging work of my career.

As he addressed his supporters in the Shoreham Hotel ballroom that day, I found myself six feet away from the just-inaugurated President of the United States, hoping I had plugged in his mic properly.

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That scene I
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day, 40 year

actor who
lost to the

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remember how even when I was a kid, my best friend Paul and I would often argue the pros and cons of our president. But for me, Reagan's story is about more than politics: it's about the American spirit and how the son of an alcoholic from the Midwest, with no connections, can become president. To some he's an icon, but even icons have flaws—they're human after all—and it's precisely those flaws that make them relatable to us.



Actor Dennis Quaid, star of the movie, strikes a Reagan-esque pose. | Courtesy of mim group

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Whatever our political views, movies about hope and success and visions, tempered by failures and setbacks, are important for us to hold onto. Big dreams and hard work can become your own story to tell.

My work has led me to curate some amazing stories. After all, we all need to be reminded to dream audacious dreams and even be prepared for those that are completely out of our reach, to come true.

So, go ahead and dream big. You never know what you're being prepared for.

Sean McNamara is the director of REAGAN, the forthcoming biopic of Ronald Reagan, starring Dennis Quaid

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