

Brad Renfro: The End

Family, friends still reeling over Brad Renfro's death, believe best was yet to come

By Betsy Pickle
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Actor Heath Ledger's death last Tuesday was proof, if any was needed, of the media and the public's short attention span. Celebrity-watching (some say celebrity-hounding) is a big-bucks industry that's constantly in search of new grist for the mill.

But for many in East Tennessee, what was business for the rest of the world was personal. Exactly one week before Ledger died, fellow actor and Knoxville native Brad Renfro passed away in his Los Angeles home at the age of 25.

For family and friends, each death was a shock and a tragedy, not a news story.

In each case, speculation about drugs being a factor in the death has run rampant, though perhaps with Renfro the discussion has been more intense because of his series of drug- and alcohol-related arrests. In general, the media seem to have been kinder to Ledger, focusing on his work and promise. With Renfro, the emphasis has been on his misdeeds.

Knoxvillians and others might do well to readjust their thinking, not just out of loyalty to a native son but because Renfro's work demands it.

Beginning with his debut in director Joel Schumacher's film of John Grisham's page-turner "The Client" and culminating earlier this month when he wrapped production on "The Informers," in which he co-starred with Billy Bob Thornton, Winona Ryder, Mickey Rourke, Kim Basinger and Brandon Routh, Renfro acted in 20 feature films and received high praise for nearly every performance he gave.

Writing about Renfro's passing in his column on Entertainment Weekly's Web site, Gary Susman called for readers to remember that Renfro "was a really good actor with a solid body of work." Susman commended Renfro's choices of "challenging indie fare, like 'Telling Lies in America' and 'Ghost World.' "

Said Susman, "In retrospect, it's easy to draw a link between the troubled youths and delinquents he often played ('Tom and Huck,' 'Sleepers,' 'Apt Pupil,' 'Bully') and his own life, but his performances in these

films indicated a young actor who, maybe only on-screen, displayed a wisdom, sensitivity and maturity beyond his years."

Friends in Knoxville concur.

Pushing through tough times

Singer-songwriter R.B. Morris, who got to know the young Renfro when both were living in the Lincoln Park area of North Knoxville, admired the actor for his breadth of talent.

"He was such a naturally creative person and thrived on that," said Morris, who encouraged guitarist Renfro's musical talents by recruiting him to play gigs. "He had a great yearning to do great work. ... He had ideas for plays and screenplays and all that stuff.

"He was all about it, loved to talk about it, loved to visualize it. He wanted to be in the heart of it. I really believe that that was his biggest drive. He was just still a kid pushing through some of these tough times."

Renfro first stepped into the limelight in May 1993, when it was announced that the 10-year-old had been cast in "The Client." He shot the film in Memphis and New Orleans that summer, when he turned 11.

A year later, Renfro took a break from shooting his second film, "The Cure," to do publicity for "The Client" as it was being released in July 1994. Over the next few months, he became Knoxville's favorite new celebrity, serving as the grand marshal for the University of Tennessee's homecoming parade and making other public appearances.

In December 1997, he was the first hometown hero to be honored by Regal Cinemas with an auditorium named in his honor at Knoxville Center. But the golden boy was tarnished six months later when he was arrested and charged with drug possession.

Half a dozen total arrests, including high-profile ones for attempting to steal a yacht in Florida and trying to buy heroin in Los Angeles, resulted in several brief stints in jail and many months of probation and court-ordered substance-abuse rehabilitation. The rehab programs benefitted Renfro, says one friend.

"This past year and a half he had been doing so well," said Samyah Jubran. "He had been in a more strict drug-treatment program through the court, and I think he was looking forward to completing it successfully.

"I was very proud of him ... for being able to overcome that addiction to drugs that he had battled for most of his teenage years."

Jubran, a Knox County assistant district attorney, handled one of Renfro's early court cases. Later, she met him through his attorney, James A.H. Bell, and then became friends with him.

"Brad and I maintained a friendship and remained in contact over the past several years," Jubran said. "He

always wanted to tell me how he was doing and make sure I knew he was either in rehab or he was always trying his best."

She says they never discussed why Renfro turned to drugs.

"I think he was more ashamed to talk to me about stuff like that," Jubran said. "I think he wanted to only tell me about when he was succeeding versus when he was failing.

"If he got arrested, I normally only found out about it through the paper."

Jubran doesn't want Renfro to be thought of as a one-time child star who became a tragic Hollywood cliché.

"Brad was such a sweet, wonderful person, and people didn't get to see that because all they ever got to see was what they read in the paper, which is when he got in trouble," she said.

Jubran said she's been upset by rude comments posted about Renfro on the Internet since his passing.

"He wasn't really given the chance to overcome any of his mistakes because he was still so young."

Jubran said she doesn't excuse the actions that led to Renfro's arrests.

"But as far as I know, he never intentionally hurt anybody. The only person he ever hurt was himself," she said, and he took responsibility for his actions.

"He went in and admitted guilt pretty much to any charge he had filed against him ... and tried to get help."

Jubran praised Renfro for his devotion to his family and to his fans.

"I'm going to miss his friendship, and I'm going to miss getting to hear about his movies, his life," she said. "I'm deeply saddened by his untimely death. But I know he's in a better place. ... He made me proud for all he accomplished."

'A wonderful ride'

Understandably, Renfro's death has hit his family hardest of all. His parents divorced when he was 5, and his grandmother, Joanne Renfro, became his guardian. Still, Renfro's parents, Mark Renfro and Angel Olsen, have always been a part of his life.

Angel Olsen still doesn't feel up to talking about her son, and Mark Renfro choked up several times as he shared memories.

Mark Renfro, general manager of a commercial printing company in Knoxville, lived in the Lincoln Park home

with his mother and son until he remarried nine years ago. Last week, with visitation and a service on Monday and his son's burial on Tuesday, took a heavy toll on Renfro, wife Kim and stepson Dane Hoffmeister.

Brad Renfro's remains didn't arrive home until the weekend after his Jan. 15 death. The burial took place a week after he died, and it was delayed more than two hours by inclement weather.

The long wait was grueling for the father.

"I know he's in heaven, but we got him taken care of," Mark Renfro said. "He's buried next to my father in a private family church cemetery in Blaine, Tenn."

The actor's maternal great-uncle, the Rev. Michael Earl, described Brad Renfro's acceptance of Christ - once at Earl's church and a second time at a river baptism - during his funeral sermon last Monday at Stevens Mortuary.

The three things Mark Renfro remembers his son enjoying most as a young child were going to the park, playing guitar and driving. Yes, driving.

"At a very early age I had him on my lap driving, steering as I worked the pedals - in parking lots," said Renfro. "We'd go to big high-school parking lots when school wasn't in session. He liked to drive a whole lot."

The future actor learned to play guitar on an instrument his father won in a radio contest. Both Renfros took lessons, but talent won out.

"He took lessons for about four or five months and was better than me at that point," said the father. "He just picked it up - a natural. Didn't learn to read music, but he'd just listen to anything on the radio (and play it)."

It was his father's classic-rock station that first influenced the youngster. Brad Renfro was a huge fan of Led Zeppelin and other hard-rock acts and maintained that affection all his life.

He even recommended music in that vein when his father asked him for tips on what to buy during what turned out to be Renfro's final visit to Knoxville earlier this month.

"I said, 'You know, I'm kinda burned out on that classic rock, son,'" Mark Renfro said. "He said, 'Well gosh, I reckon so, Dad. It's been 25 years now. I was listening to it when I was a baby.'"

His son's tastes actually ran wider than '70s arena gods.

"He enjoyed jazz and bluegrass and the blues," said Mark Renfro. "Just pretty much any genre of music. He could play it, too. I'd just sit, amazed, at the musical talent he had.

"Couldn't sing a note. He complained that he had my voice. But other than that, he could play guitar as good as anyone else that you see or hear on records."

Renfro says he saw no early signs of his son having potential to be an actor.

"No more so than any intelligent, bright young child," he said. "Every child is an actor. They act to get what they want.

"He was always outspoken. Respectful, though, of me and my mother. ... Very determined to get what he wanted. But at the same time he knew authority. But he didn't like it a whole lot."

Once he started acting, his son loved almost everything about it, Renfro says.

"He really enjoyed the acting and ... the camaraderie of the people on the set," Renfro recalled. "He would be best friends with the grips and the people that run the sound and the drivers. The drivers were his favorite people - and of course craft (food) service.

"But as far as your press obligations ... he absolutely hated it. He didn't relish it and would just get through it, sometimes with a little nudge."

The actor had no problem with fans. He welcomed them, in fact, says his father.

"There would always be a group of girls that would sit there till you got through filming that day," Renfro said. "There was a security point where you couldn't go beyond; they would be standing outside there at the gate. It might be 11, 12, 1, 2, 3, 4 o'clock in the morning ...

"Whatever time it was, he would always want to stop and roll the window down and sign autographs and let 'em take pictures. Get out and hug, take pictures, give 'em a kiss, whatever. He liked that. He loved the adoration."

Renfro says his son was a fan of actors more than movie stars, dedicated craftsmen like Robert Duvall, Christopher Walken and accomplished character actors.

He admired and learned from the veterans he worked with, people like Susan Sarandon, Tommy Lee Jones, Sir Ian McKellen, Brad Pitt and Kevin Bacon.

"Brad Pitt was just an exceptionally nice young man," Mark Renfro said. "He'd heard my mom wanted to meet him. So he took the time, and he came into our little trailer between scenes and was talking with us.

"My mom said to him, 'Are your eyes really blue?' ... He took his sunglasses off and kneeled down in front of my mother and just peered at her. 'Yeah.' So we're big Brad Pitt fans.

"Everybody he worked with has always been ... wonderful to him and us as a family. Directors, producers, everybody on the set. It was just a unique and wonderful experience. There was really nothing bad about it.

"Mom was talking just the other day. She said, 'Wow, Mark, what a wonderful ride our boy took us on.'"

Renfro believes his son had many good films in front of him.

"He was really doing good," said Mark Renfro. "He looked good, was doing what he had to do and was going to come back.

"I'm not going to say he was going to win an Academy Award, but he was going to be a player, a force. It would have been his lifelong career, which is all he ever wanted."

One surprise that came out after Renfro's death was the fact that he had a son. Mark and Kim Renfro have pledged to protect the privacy of the 4-year-old and his mother, who live in Tokyo, but they hope to continue their relationship with the pair.

Jubran says even though Brad Renfro was unabashedly determined to remain a bachelor, he was happy to become a father.

"He showed me a picture of his son, and he was very excited and I know looking forward to being a good dad," she said.

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