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Filmmaker explores custom-made dreams

by Monica Hogan | Staff Writer

“All the films I make are really about me,” says Andrei Kirilenko, 39, a Bethesda-based filmmaker who finished shooting his second full-length documentary, “gLOCALization Tales,” in mid-June.

The film, which Kirilenko plans to wrap up by November, deals with the intersection of local communities and the global influences they face. More specifically, it’s about the intersection of Woodmont and Norfolk avenues and the Starbucks baristas and customers who interact on that particular corner of Bethesda.

Kirilenko was drawn to the subject when he started listening to the stories the baristas told after they befriended his 4-year-old son Luke, who gets hot chocolate at Starbucks. “He’s cute,” Kirilenko says. “Everybody takes to him.”

The filmmaker found the baristas had interesting stories and different points of view.

“What they see from the other side of the counter might not be what I see,” he says. During the filming, for example, the baristas

asserted that some Starbucks customers seem impatient. In hearing the stories of customers interviewed for the film, Kirilenko learned that one was a former public relations executive who became a social worker traveling to aid people in crisis.

“What if that impatient customer was rushing to board a plane to help victims of Katrina?” Kirilenko asked rhetorically. “Would you feel differently? I would.”

One of filmmaker’s goals is to help people break down stereotypes and reach across divides, whether across counters or cultures.

“I like to make films that bring people together rather than divide them,” he says.



Laurie DeWitt/The Gazette

Filmmaker Andrei Kirilenko lives his own American dream in Bethesda with wife Shelley and son Luke.

“One message I have is just to treat other people nicely,” Kirilenko adds. “It makes people’s days to be treated nicely.”

The conversations with the four baristas and four Starbucks customers in the film “exceeded my expectations,” he says. What emerged is a redefining of the American dream, which used to mean a house in the suburbs, a steady job with a big company and 2.1 kids. That coincided with the all-American coffee, which was regular coffee, and if any choice was involved, it was how much cream or sugar to add.

“Now, fast-forward to Starbucks, and there’s a multitude of choice in coffee,” Kirilenko observes, including size, temperature, flavor and ingredients.

And even though Starbucks menu is so large it can be overwhelming, “most people don’t even order from the menu; they order off the menu,” Kirilenko says. “And nobody bats an eye.”

Kirilenko correlates the new American coffee habit to the new American dream. People have new choices, which give them the opportunity to custom tailor individual dreams.

As Bethesda residents, most of the customers at this Starbucks “are in the position to custom-design their own American dream,” Kirilenko says.

But on the other side of the counter, the baristas still have a way to go before they’re in a similar position. They’ll have to work hard, educate themselves and put a support network in place, the filmmaker says.

“We’re not trying to say the custom-made American dream is available to everyone,”

Kirilenko explains. “A large group of people can’t afford a \$4 cup of coffee, and a lot of people can’t afford to custom-make their dreams. They just don’t have the resources.”

But even though the baristas might not be able to afford to live in Bethesda or even buy a cup of coffee on a daily basis at the store where they work, “they have their own dreams,”

Kirilenko says. “They understand the value of education.”

Like Kirilenko, several of the baristas interviewed for the film were foreign-born. Kirilenko left the Ukraine as a graduate student to attend the University of Pennsylvania, where he met his wife.

He believes the baristas interviewed for the film are all off to a good start, and have a good chance of fulfilling their dreams because they’ve already shown that they are “open to being open.”

Kirilenko hopes the two- to three-hour interview process that each barista underwent in some way energized their lives and made them proud to share their stories.

“I did not want to make their lives more difficult,” Kirilenko says. “They’re working hard.”

He notes that some baristas who had originally agreed to participate in the film later declined, “and that is OK.”

Kirilenko had similar conversations when finding couples to agree to participate in his first documentary, “TechnoStorks,” which he co-produced with his wife, Shelley. Released on DVD in 2006, “TechnoStorks” follows three couples going through assisted reproduction treatments.

“Not all the couples were successful in the end,” Kirilenko says.

Asked if he was concerned that the added stress of being followed by film crews could have impacted their treatment, Kirilenko makes it clear that he had grappled with the possibility.

“I discussed with the couples, If at any point in this, it introduces extra stress in your lives, we’ll stop on the spot,” Kirilenko says.

He adds that the documentary was never meant as an exposé, but as a sincere, honest film. And if anyone could sympathize with the couples going through in vitro fertilization treatments, Kirilenko and his wife could. They had been through the process themselves.

“Through a miraculous coincidence of events, we did benefit after six months, on our second IVF try,” Kirilenko says.

Even now, he questions whether he would have let cameras follow him and his wife through their attempts. He likes to think that knowing how the filmmaking experience turned out, he would have.

“It’s something very private and personal,” Kirilenko says. “The couples saw this as a way of paying forward.”

Before making “Techno-Storks,” Kirilenko and his wife produced an eight-minute narrative film with scenes from a full-length script called “Light and Dark” that she had written.

The couple decided to make “TechnoStorks” because it was something they would have appreciated having available while they were going through treatments. He says the information on the subject is typically either very technical in nature, or what he calls the more populist view, “where you walk into a clinic with a cup of sperm and walk away with a baby.”

Until he and his wife underwent IVF treatments, he says, he didn’t know what kind of emotional rollercoaster they would be on or that he would have to administer injections to his wife three times a day. “TechnoStorks” was made to help educate friends and families, not just the couples directly involved in the IVF process.

“Couples have friends, families, moms and dads and grandmothers,” Kirilenko says. “It’s very painful when people ask you, at every party, why aren’t you having kids?”

The “TechnoStorks” DVD can help couples get their loved ones to understand and stop asking the most painful questions.

“There’s the stereotype that a couple of a certain age, with health and financial stability, should have a child,” Kirilenko says. “By society, they’re being accused of making decisions they have not made.”

As in “gLOCALization Tales,” with “TechnoStorks,” the intention was to break stereotypes, to allow an audience to see other people in ways they don’t always reveal themselves.

“The people at Starbucks didn’t know I made films,” Kirilenko notes. “To them, I’m just Luke’s Dad.”

With two documentaries under his belt, Kirilenko plans to return to narrative films. He’s writing an action film now, but due to budgetary concerns, he warns, “Don’t expect any long car chases from me.”

For information on Kirilenko’s documentaries, visit www.glocalizationtales.com and www.technostorks.com