

Vail Daily

Backing into Hollywood

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VAIL — “Remember the Titans” star Kip Pardue says he’s honored to receive this year’s Rising Star Award at the Vail Film Festival. He’s also very much looking forward to getting up on the hill to do a little snowboarding.

“I’m a snowboarder and my girlfriend’s a skier,” Pardue said on the phone from his home in Venice Beach Tuesday. “It’s very much a part of our lives.”

What’s also become part of his life is snagging roles in notable films, starting with “Remember the Titans” in 2001 and up to “Loggerheads” with Tess Harper and Bonnie Hunt - which screens at VFF Friday night.

Looking back on his relatively short film career, Pardue can only wonder at how it all happened. At the same time, he understands his story is the kind that sends the hopefuls flocking to L.A. for that big break.

“I was studying economics at Yale, I played football,” he said. “I had no interest in becoming an actor whatsoever.”

But in the summer between his sophomore and junior years at Yale, the Atlanta native went to L.A. for an internship, working as a production assistant in Hollywood. There, he caught the eye of agent Jason Weinberg, who asked him if he was interested in becoming an actor. To this day, Pardue says he doesn’t know what it was Weinberg saw in him.

“I just kind of laughed,” he recalled. “I didn’t know what to say.”

Returning to New Haven, he was just about to graduate from Yale two years later when Weinberg called him and reiterated his suggestion. This time, Pardue said yes, and it was only about three months after arriving in L.A. that he got his first film (“But I’m a Cheerleader”). Before he was there a year, he landed “Remember the Titans.”

“I’m so glad I made that movie,” Pardue said. “But I would love to go back with the (acting) experience I have now. Crazy things happened in my first two or three years there — here I was suddenly, in a \$100 million movie, almost before I knew how to act.”

Pardue, now 28, said a lot of young actors in Hollywood end up in films before they’re emotionally ready for it. For him, appearing in “Remember the Titans” with Denzel Washington served as something of a wakeup call.

“It altered my career in that it really made me think of myself as an actor as opposed to just an entity,” he said.

Up next

This past year, Pardue had films at Cannes, Sundance and the Tribeca (NY) Film Festival, and he just finished filming “Undiscovered” with Ashlee Simpson and Carrie Fisher. That, the actor said, was a nice break.

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"The past few years I've been making movies that are pretty heavy and depressing," he said. "My friends get upset with me because they go to my films and end up crying."

Doing the light "Undiscovered" was, he said, a bit of a purge from all that. How could it not be, with Ashlee Simpson?

"She did a great job," Pardue said. "It was really a fun turn for me, to do a romantic comedy like that. I got to play a card."

With the bulk of his credits in independent films, Pardue said he's interested in doing some more big, commercial films.

"I'd like to do something more studio-driven next," he said. "Maybe an action movie or a comedy. I guess it's kind of the opposite of what a lot of people say, but I've done 10 of those (indie films) and I die in every movie."

Indie or not, Pardue said he's getting to the point where people recognize him — but they don't know his name. Sometimes they'll call him "Sunshine" - his character in "Remember the Titans." Or they think they know him from high school.

"Like maybe they went to prom with me," he said laughing. "They feel they know me, so I figure that means I'm doing my job."

Pardue calls the VVF award a "tremendous honor," sounding genuinely tickled at the recognition. "It's so strange," he said. "I do this job, and it's really tough to convince myself that anyone is paying attention. So it's nice to know that people - and people who watch a lot of films - are responding to what I'm doing."

Enjoying the ride, Pardue said he knows how lucky he is and that most young actors in Hollywood don't come across the opportunities he has.

"I was just in the right place at the right time," he said. "If you spend any time at all in L.A., you become aware of all the people out there who want to be in this business. With my success, there's a little bit of guilt that goes along with that, but I'm getting over it."