

The Fighter turns Hollywood's admiring eyes on Lowell

The Lowell Sun

Updated: 12/10/2010 08:12:37 AM EST

By Sarah Fahey

Special to The Sun

Although Hollywood once knocked Lowell down, The Fighter is now picking the city back up.

During graduate school at Emerson College, I struggled with a professor who immediately showed disdain towards me. One day I walked in as she announced, "Today we're going to watch a documentary on Lowell, Massachusetts."

"That's where I'm from," I cried with my low-cut jeans and bleached blonde hair.

"It's called High on Crack Street: Lost Lives in Lowell," she answered.

Despite that particular professor's grudge, I graduated from Emerson, moved to Los Angeles and found work in the entertainment industry. When I first moved to Los Angeles in 2006, a script titled Mickey and Dickie floated through Tinseltown. Another movie about drug addictions and Lowell, I thought.

Three years later, after working on a television pilot in Boston, I met with my friends on Market Street at a hipster coffee shop called Brew'd Awakening.

A man spoke on his cell phone at a neighboring table. "They're right. Lowell's the perfect place to shoot it. The boxing gym looks exactly the same

and the family still lives here."

When he finished his conversation I approached him and asked about the movie. If Lowell planned to welcome Hollywood back in after the first humiliation, I wanted to be involved.

"Here's my card," he said. The card informed me he was a producer on the film. I returned to Los Angeles the next day but

kept in touch with him. I read the new Mickey and Dickie script, now called The Fighter and fell in love with the story.

Three weeks later, I hopped back on a plane from LAX to Logan. I had taken a job as a production assistant despite the fact that the position was lower than what I worked at the time.

We set up offices in The Boott Mills and I remembered why I love Lowell so much. Cobblestone streets look up at brick buildings while trolleys travel over them. Lowell is living history.

"There were a variety of factors that caused them to shoot in Lowell," Collin Walls, the location scout for The Fighter told me, "but the most important factor was David (O. Russell, director) and Mark (Wahlberg's) desire to portray the real town with authentic locations. They felt shooting it somewhere else would compromise the quality of the project."

It's no secret that the producers and crew took care of the town during filming. Millions of dollars were spent in the city during the 33 days of shooting. We ordered from primarily mom-and-pop restaurants such as Life Alive, [The Olympia](#) and Blue Taleh. Forgoing Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks, coffee arrived in buckets from Brew'd Awakenings.

One of the main characters, Micky O'Keefe played

himself. Unlike the last time a camera crew offered a Lowell resident a chance to play himself in a movie, O'Keefe was cast as a sober protector of Mickey Ward -- not portrayed as a hopeless crackhead like Dickie Eklund had been in High on Crack Street.

At a small private screening of The Fighter in Pasadena, Calif., David O. Russell addressed a room of industry elite. "We used handheld cameras to shoot the film because we wanted to move the camera in an intimate way. The people of Lowell opened up their world to us. The film is authentic and original because of Lowell and the people that make it up. All we did to make this movie was study them and retell their story," he said.

As David returned to his seat, the lights dimmed and three words appeared on a black screen: "Lowell, Massachusetts 1993." One of the dozen producers in the room whistled. I'm sure he never spent a day in his life in Lowell, maybe Boston or The Cape, but not Lowell. Nonetheless, there he was in a dark room in Los Angeles clapping for my city. My eyes filled with tears as the screen turned to a shot of Mark Wahlberg putting asphalt down on Westford Street.

David O. Russell, Mark Wahlberg, Christian Bale, Melissa Leo and Amy Adams did a service to this city that will be revealed nationally on Dec. 17. The main story is of Irish Mickey Ward overcoming obstacles and forcing himself into a leadership role. However, the subplot speaks of another rising star -- Lowell. Instead of using the city as a setting, Lowell became a living, breathing character parallel to Mickey Ward.

The Fighter undoes the damage done over a decade ago by the HBO documentary High on Crack Street. It shows a different side of the people of this city by confessing the love, loyalty and strength in Lowell's quirky, blue-collar locals we all call family. The film

highlights the ability to overcome fear, addiction and poverty redeeming Lowell against HBO by saying, lost lives have been found.

"For you. For me. For Lowell," Dickie tells Mickey, but it could have just as easily been David O. Russell saying that to Mark Wahlberg. The film forms as an ode to our city complete with poetic, breathtaking cinematography, accurate accents and proper representation of the residents.

If The Departed put Boston back on Hollywood's map, there is no reason The Fighter can't do the same thing for Lowell.

Sarah Fahey, a Lowell native, and works as a writer on the ABC-TV sitcom, "No Ordinary Family", starring Lowell-born Michael Chiklis.