



Staten Island Advance

TV producer lauds 9/11 firefighter

Russ Hodge produces documentary on Island cousin Stephen Siller, who sprinted through tunnel

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WASHINGTON -- Television producer Russ Hodge got the idea for his latest documentary while attending last year's Tunnel-to-Tower Run commemorating his cousin, Stephen Siller, the West Brighton firefighter who died on 9/11 after sprinting through the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel with 80 pounds of gear on his back to join the rescue effort at the World Trade Center.

"It kind of hit me in the face," said Hodge, an Eltingville native. "It's a great story and this is my family."

The two cousins were not especially close. Siller was five years younger than Hodge and moved from West Brighton to Long Island at age 9 to live with his oldest brother, Russell, after their widower father, George, died.

But the youths grew up in a large and cohesive extended family. "I had about 30 cousins," said Hodge. "I didn't hang out with him every Thanksgiving, but I kept up with him through my mother and my sisters."

Hodge's mother, the former Dorothy Siller, George's sister, was very fond of her nephew, Stephen, the youngest of seven children. She danced with him at his wedding and kept a picture of his five children on the top of her refrigerator.

"He was a wonderful human being," said Hodge. "He lived to help other people ... He was a salt-of-the-earth type of guy."

SHOW TO AIR SEPT. 11

Among his discoveries during the making of "For the Love of Their Brother" -- a 30-minute documentary on the Siller family set to air on public television stations around the country on this year's Sept. 11 anniversary -- Hodge learned from Siller's brothers and sisters that he actually prepared himself for a time when he would have to run to an emergency scene.

"He trained for it," Hodge said. "He would get on the Stairmaster with 60 or 70 pounds of equipment and he would stay on it for hours."

Siller, 34, was finally faced with the foot-race scenario on Sept. 11, 2001, after completing the night-shift at his Brooklyn firehouse and learning of the terrorist attack on the radio scanner in his truck. He immediately spun it around in traffic and first drove back to his firehouse, only to find it empty. He then headed for the Battery Tunnel, which by then was closed to civilian vehicles.

Narrated by actor John Turturro, Hodge's film focuses initially on Siller's response to Sept. 11 and then on how his family dealt with his loss -- by among other things establishing the annual 5K Tunnel-To-Tower Walk/Run, a fund-raising event that has so far brought in over \$300,000. Much of it has gone to the city firefighter's Burn Foundation for children injured by fires.

'DECISION TO DO GOOD'

"The idea is they could have chosen to be bitter," Hodge said of his cousins. "Instead they turned their pain into something positive. They made a conscious decision to do good."

A graduate of Moore Catholic High School, Hodge, 43, has been in the radio and television business for more than two decades. After starting out at WNBC radio and TV in Manhattan, he relocated to this city in the mid-1980s to produce NBC's long-running political talk show "McLaughlin and Company."

"Everybody asks me what he's like," said Hodge of John McLaughlin, the show's occasionally prickly host. "I always say the person you see on TV is similar to the person in real life. That's all you are going to get out of me."

In the early 1990s, he launched a yuppie spin-off of "McLaughlin" for Fox television, "Off the Record." It featured a trendy looking set with fluffed up sofas and a cadre of hip, young commentators, such as then-Republican Rep. Susan Molinari and Tony Snow, the conservative journalist who later became a Sunday morning news show anchor for Fox.

But although the show had good ratings and eventually earned Hodge an Emmy, Fox killed it after only three years. Network owner Rupert Murdoch was in financial trouble at the time and reckoned that he could squeeze more money out of Fox's Sunday morning time slots by turning them over to religious programming.

The show's fate "taught me all I needed to know about television," said Hodge. "And that is -- your have to be in charge of your own destiny."

PRODUCTION COMPANY

His next move: The 1993 founding of his own group, 3 Roads Communications, a full production company based in Frederick, Md. -- where Hodge lives near his three sons, aged 15, 12 and 9 -- and with an office in Manhattan

The company's scored a hit with its first project, Fox television's "Politically Incorrect," the late-night political talk show hosted by stiletto-tongued standup comedian Bill Maher.

"It was a radical innovation for the time," said Hodge. "It proved you could have a political discussion show that was not ... deadly dull and was appealing to younger audiences."

The company's other clients have included the government broadcasting service Voice of America, for which Hodge has produced television news programs in troubled areas around the world like the Middle East and former parts of the Soviet Union.

In one Voice of America project a few years ago, he was asked to organize a Farsi-language, half-hour daily news broadcast for Iran and have it on the air within 10 days. "We did it and it got great reviews," said Hodge.

He added that what made the venture especially daunting was that "you can never know exactly what one is saying in Farsi."

MANY DOCUMENTARIES

Under Hodge's aegis, 3 Roads has also produced a number of well-received documentaries for public television, among them "Frontiers of Medicine," a 39-part series on advances in medical technology, and "The Gift of Life," a documentary on a program to save the lives of critically ill children in Third World countries.

Hodge explained that his basic approach as a television producer was to do shows that "celebrate ordinary people doing extraordinary things."

"I would certainly put Stephen Siller and his brothers and sisters into that category," Hodge said.

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