

On Wisconsin

For University of Wisconsin-Madison Alumni and Friends

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converse about the writing life.*

SPRING 2010

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Tyler Knowles '05

headed to Hollywood after graduation to make movies, but he had to return to Wisconsin to realize the dream of directing his first film.

It was only fitting. As a communication arts major at UW-Madison, Knowles learned the basics of movie-making while shooting student films on campus, and along the way, he mastered the fine art of doing a lot with very little.

Knowles called on those skills throughout the making of *Go West Happy Cow*, a movie he conceived and directed. Filming started in Madison last September

and wrapped when the cinematic road trip ended in California just over a week later. (See story, page 36.) He had plenty to be nervous about from the get-go. He met one of his two lead actors for the first time the night before shooting started — and he wasn't sure if either of them could act. But along the way, he drew from both the academic and extracurricular experiences he had on campus.

When Knowles was weighing colleges as a high school student, he visited Los Angeles and looked at schools renowned for film studies, but found them lacking. When he chose the UW, it was for its atmosphere and opportunities, not because he thought it was a place he could learn how to be a filmmaker. But that's what happened.

While he was a student, Knowles was manager for the MadHatters, a UW men's a cappella group. He organized gigs, including a West Coast tour that followed almost the same route that his movie does, traveling through Denver and Las Vegas, and on to Los Angeles. As it turned out, keeping track of sixteen singers was far more difficult than leading the team making the movie. Knowles also managed the now-defunct University Square Theater during his last year at the UW, which helped him learn about the business end of film production and showed him firsthand how a filmmaker's vision can directly touch audiences.

But the most important message Knowles took with him from Wisconsin was the encouragement from professors, friends, and family to go west and pursue his dreams.



Tyler Knowles directs *Go West Happy Cow* on the first day of filming.

JEFF MILLER

Jenny Price '96

Moovie Making

Producing an independent film means taking risks, calling upon friends, and — in this case — *a cow costume.*



By Jenny Price '96

It's a near-perfect autumn morning on State Street, and Tyler Knowles '05 is about to direct his first movie.

"We're behind — it's 9:01," he says with a nervous smile, clutching a cup of coffee as he awaits the arrival of his actors and crew. He's about to lead the group on a more than two-thousand-mile, eight-day road trip from Madison to California in his quest to turn a dream into reality on a \$10,000 budget.

Everyone involved in making the mockumentary-style, improvisational film is either a UW-Madison alumnus or has strong ties to the state, giving Knowles the perfect team for a project that is, more than anything, intended as a love letter to Wisconsin, with all of its quirks and kooky traditions.

Go West Happy Cow is the story of two childhood friends from Wisconsin who make their way to California in an effort to impress a potential employer, win back the girl (in the case of one of the characters),

and promote a beer known as "Happy Cow" that is only available in their home state. Or, in industry parlance, it's *This Is Spinal Tap* meets *Strange Brew* and *Road Trip*, with a little *Tommy Boy* mixed in.

"It was a bona fide road trip. It's seven guys, two vehicles," says producer Derek Hildebrandt '93. But here's where it gets really interesting: Knowles and Hildebrandt, a former Bucky Badger, decided to harness the power of UW alumni networks to secure shooting locations and to provide extras for scenes filmed at stops along the way.

Before shooting a single scene of *Go West Happy Cow*, Knowles built a Web site (www.gowesthappycow.com) that explained the premise of the film, its characters, and its inspirations. The production team also used Facebook and a startup Web site called Eventbrite to give people the chance to attend parties connected to each stop along their route: Madison, Chicago, Kansas City, Denver, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles.

"We were able to build some buzz," Knowles says. "We were able to connect with Wisconsin people primarily and get them to show up at these events."

The social networking strategy also yielded a mailing list of participants Knowles and company can keep updated on the status of the movie, letting them know where to watch clips and, eventually, how to buy a DVD or catch a local screening.

"It's really amazing, the technology that's out there now that just lets a little film ... become something bigger," Knowles says.

Paternal Assist

Knowles moved to L.A. to follow his dream of directing immediately after spending his final UW semester abroad in London. But it didn't happen right away. He first worked as a temp for E! Entertainment Television before finding a job leading lessons and workshops at the Apple store in Century City. He then spent six months singing a cappella

on a cruise ship — he'd been a member of MadHatters at UW — before returning to California and to Apple, while also doing freelance work, including editing several low-budget feature films. "I've had friends who have really been broken down and ended up leaving L.A., because they just work like crazy and they're not appreciated. They're kind of a gofer ... go for this, go for that," Knowles says.

Knowles came up with the idea for his film in 2008, during a Christmas trip home to Richland Center, Wisconsin, and his father, Jack, agreed to put up the budget for the project. Jack Knowles earned the title "utility stunts," along with executive producer, for driving the truck and trailer loaded with Wisconsin beer, bratwurst, and cheese for 90 percent of the trip — a task that included parallel parking the forty-five-foot rig in Kansas City. Knowles hopes the movie will be successful enough to return his father's investment in the project.

Take One!

Several months before last fall's shoot, Knowles worked with Hildebrandt, whom he met through the Wisconsin Alumni Association chapter in L.A., and with other cast and crew members to finalize the story and production details.

On the first day of filming, the lead actors arrive: Mike Tiboris '02, a PhD philosophy student at University of California-San Diego, and Kurt Jensen '04, a laboratory technician support supervisor in Madison who is using furlough days to take on the role of "Kurt the Cow." It's one of the few times Jensen will be in street clothes for filming; he spends about 90 percent of the movie in a cow costume — surprisingly comfortable attire, given that he, too, was a Bucky Badger during his college days.



Troy Vosseller (center) gets direction from Tyler Knowles (right) and some advice from director of photography Ben Simms (left): "Even if you think you screw up, just keep going."

The set for the morning's shoot is the Scownie Nation store, owned by Troy Vosseller '06, MBA'09, who is providing the wardrobe for the movie and acting the part of an entrepreneur who is sending the pair across the country on the promotional tour for Happy Cow beer.

While Knowles and crew work to set up the shot and prep Vosseller for the scene — a telephone call with Kurt the Cow — Jensen huddles with Tiboris at the front of the store. They keep cracking up as they plot out his side of the conversation using a piece of cardboard and a marker.

When the scenes at the store wrap and the crew begins packing up, Jensen and Tiboris run across the street to buy a Cheesehead hat that Tiboris will wear in a scene to be shot later that day at University Ridge Golf Course. He hands the receipt for \$21.05 to Knowles, who says there is room in the film's limited budget for the key piece of headgear.

Pulling It Off

Back in his L.A. apartment after shooting *Go West Happy Cow*, Knowles spent two months working furiously to create a rough cut to submit to the Wisconsin Film Festival, paring down more than thirty hours of digital film footage into a ninety-minute movie. Seeing the story emerge from days filled with little sleep,

bad eating, and endless hours on the road between locations was a relief, but mainly, it represented progress toward his main goal, which Knowles describes as "being able to say we pulled this off."

And pulling it off required Knowles and his team to be resourceful — and flexible. When they realized that renting a sport utility vehicle to follow the truck and trailer would cost \$1,800, they instead bought a minivan with 130,000 miles on it for \$1,000.

After an actor who was to play the role of the "mad beer scientist" dropped out, Knowles called his former high school band and drama teacher, Chris Simonson MS'92, the night before filming started and asked for help. Simonson provided his own wardrobe and borrowed a fog machine from the Riverdale High School student council to use in his scenes, which took place in a "mini-brewery" rigged up in Jack Knowles's workshop.

"Whatever road blocks came up, they would just find a way around them," Simonson says. "I have such admiration for kids like Tyler who throw caution to the wind. ... This was really, really what he wanted to do, and I admire him for sticking with that and saying, 'This is my dream.'" ■

Jenny Price '96 is a big fan of the brew that served as the inspiration for Happy Cow beer.