

HOME COOKING

CORBIN BERNSEN — YES, CORBIN BERNSEN — SHOWS THAT COMMUNITY BUILDING CAN NOT ONLY HELP MOVIES GET MADE BUT STRENGTHEN LOCAL ECONOMIES. BY TODD LONGWELL

Corbin Bernsen believes he's on to something.

"I think our economic recovery is going to come directly from brick-by-brick community building," says the former *L.A. Law* star who can currently be seen on USA Network's *Psych*. "Inside out, I call it."

Bernsen has been putting the idea into action, not in typical celebrity ways like the occasional Habitat for Humanity build or holiday photo op at the local soup kitchen, but through filmmaking. And while Bernsen may be a TV star and household name, his efforts at turning regional communities into production centers have something to teach less well-known independent filmmakers interested in leveraging the local for their own pictures.

In September 2009, Bernsen spotted an article in USA Today about the plight of the Akron, Ohio-based All-American Soap Box Derby (AASBD). The seven decade-old organization was in dire financial straits, having nearly defaulted on \$623,000 in debt after posting a \$400,000 loss in 2008.

Inspired, Bernsen contacted AASBD officials with the idea of making a movie set against the backdrop of the derby. He would write, direct, produce and co-star in the film and the derby would receive 10% of the film's budget upfront as a licensing fee, helping them with their short-term cash crunch. The organization would be a profit participant in the

film, which in turn would function as a promotional device for the organization.

Bernsen engaged the Greater Akron Chamber, which invested \$100,000 of its development funds and hosted meetings to bring in other local investors to round out the \$550,000 budget. He also lined up a number of corporate tie-ins, including Tire Rack, Omini Dual Saw and Geico Insurance, the latter of which signed on as the derby's title sponsor in the film and in real life.

"I'M MAKING MOVIES WITH COMMUNITY AND I'M SELLING THEM TO COMMUNITY BY ENGAGING COMMUNITY," SAYS BERNSEN, "AND THAT ALL GETS BACK TO MAIN STREET."

When the derby film, titled *25 Hill* went before the cameras in Akron in April 2010, it generated excitement among residents, thousands of whom turned out for a casting call for background players, and boosted the derby's media profile by generating local and national media attention, including an article in *The Wall Street Journal*. Perhaps most importantly, "it showed businesses that are moving here that we get things done and that we embrace the successful assets we have," says Dan Colantone, president and CEO of the Greater Akron Chamber.

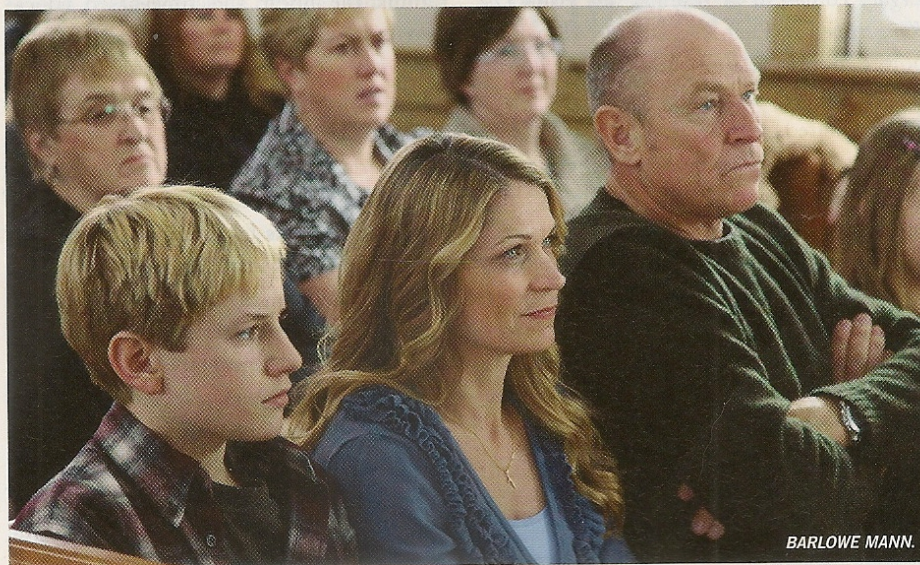
Bernsen has employed this "community filmmaking" model on two other films, *Rust* (released by Sony on DVD in October 2010) and the upcoming *Barlowe Mann*, shot in the small Canadian towns of Kipling, Saskatchewan and Provost, Alberta, respectively.

"I come into town, get a handful of people to invest," Bernsen explains. "They're all interested in the community, learning something new." In *Rust* and *Barlowe Mann*, "half of the town is in the credits, whether it's for cooking us meals, picking up people or loaning us their cherry picker for high shots."

As economic development director in Kipling and now Provost, Bert Roach was instrumental in both projects. Although *Barlowe Mann* is still in post-production, Roach says Provost has already profited from having 40 or 50 extra people in town during the shoot, paying for food, lodging and equipment rentals. But the most important impact has been psychological.

"Hollywood was here to shoot a movie," he says. "How many small communities in rural Alberta can say that? Not that many."

The idea of community filmmaking is not unique to Bernsen. Over the last decade, production incentive programs have sprung up in more than 40 states across the U.S. (*25 Hill* got a 35% tax credit from the state of Ohio), drawing both Hollywood and independent projects to what industry-ites once referred to as "fly-over country." Incentives and the film production activity they have created have also spawned homegrown production companies



like Hopwood DePree's TickTock Studios, which harnessed Michigan's 42% tax credit to turn a rundown neighborhood in the town of Holland into a small studio operation.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the non-profit Steeltown Entertainment Project is working with successful entertainment figures with local ties to generate media projects in the region, including an upcoming untitled women's talk show created by Pittsburgh native James Widdoes (director of CBS's *Two and a Half Men*) and funded by the Pittsburgh Innovative Media Incubator, a co-venture with local PBS station WQED.

With the Incubator, "we have enough money to do two or three major projects a year," says Steeltown executive producer Carl Kurlander, co-writer of the 1985 film *St. Elmo's Fire*. "The industry is in creative disruption. People are always looking for different models...[and] regionalism is going to play an increasingly bigger role."

Bernsen's community efforts began in the spring of 2006 when he was driving through Los Angeles, listening to the radio, and heard deejays describing the efforts of Kyle MacDonald, a Canadian blogger who became an overnight Internet celebrity with his campaign to acquire a house through a series of online trades beginning with one red paper clip.

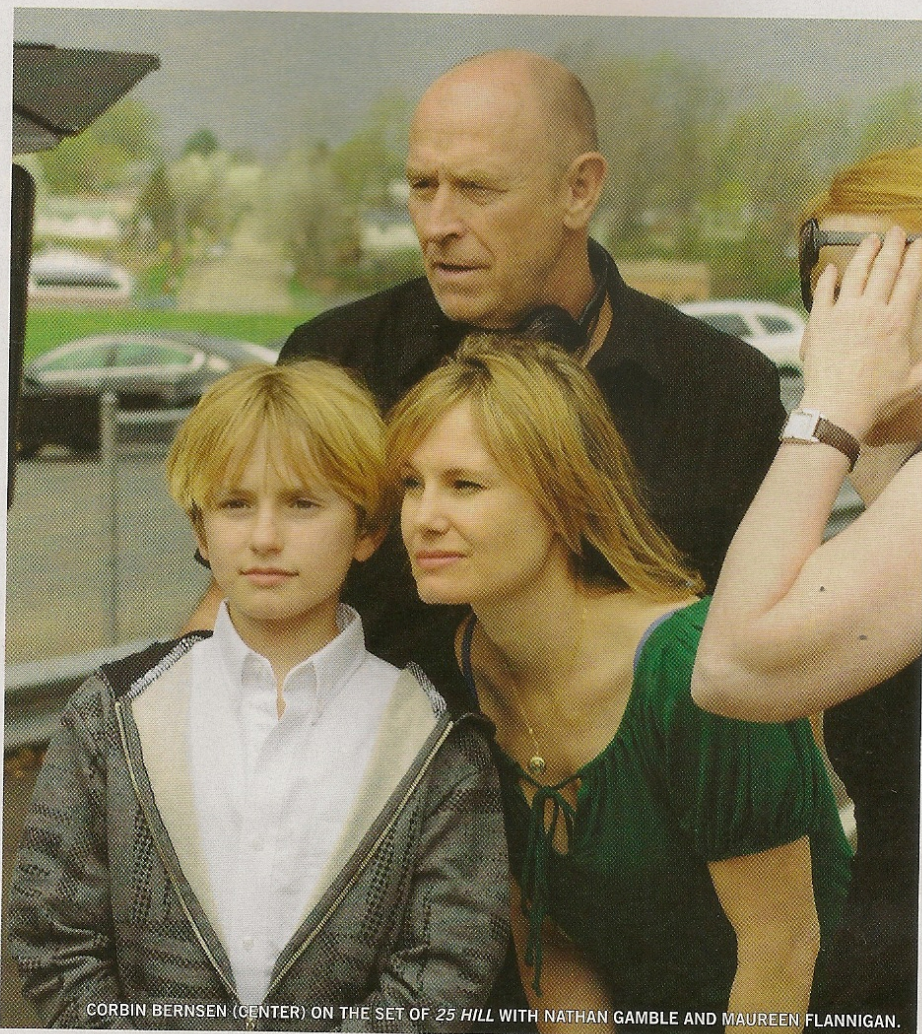
"I thought, [MacDonald] has seven million people who follow him," Bernsen recalls. "I'm going to hop on this kid's train. I'll be the caboose or whatever he wants."

An avid snow globe collector (he owns more than 7,000), Bernsen contacted MacDonald and, in June of 2006, arranged to trade a role in his film *Donna On Demand* for a motorized KISS snow globe.

"At that point, I didn't even have a [completed] script," Bernsen admits. "But I just thought, 'I'll get in on this thing and I'll figure the rest out later.'"

Meanwhile up in Kipling, Roach was struggling to find a way to generate big media attention for the small town (pop. 1,140). Hearing about the one red paper clip project from his niece, he helped Kipling put together a trade for the movie role that included a 1,100-square-foot home on Main Street built in the 1920s and the key to the city, and MacDonald accepted.

The trade was officially completed in September at a three-day event held in Kipling over Labor Day weekend. Billed as "Saskatchewan's Biggest Housewarming Party Ever," it featured bands, bouncy houses, hot air balloon rides and a series of *American*



CORBIN BERNSEN (CENTER) ON THE SET OF *25 HILL* WITH NATHAN GAMBLE AND MAUREEN FLANNIGAN.

Idol-style auditions for the role culminating with Bernsen's announcement of the winner, 19-year-old Nolan Hubbard.

Impressed by the town's raw talent and entrepreneurial spirit, Bernsen told the mayor he wanted to shoot another script he wrote, *Three-Day Test*, right in Kipling.

"She said, 'What if we finance it?'" recalls Bernsen. "I said, 'What do you mean finance?' She said, 'We have some wealthy farmers up here. How much money do you need?'"

Bernsen needed \$500,000, but funds from various local sources — including a pair of elderly sisters who chipped in to buy a single \$1,000 share — topped out at about \$300,000 after a few months. Then his father died in 2008, inspiring Bernsen to write *Rust*, a more serious script about a minister suffering a crisis of faith that could be made with the money already raised. It went before cameras in Kipling in early 2009 with residents in key roles, including farmer Frank Gall as the minister's (Bernsen's) father.

"It's a big lesson to me as an actor," Bernsen admits. "These are real people. I can't do any

bullshit acting."

Bernsen is well aware that a lot of people will be crying BS if they don't see a return on their investment.

"Nobody is saying, 'Oh, it's just for fun,'" Bernsen insists. "Everybody wants to make money, including myself...and it's starting to happen."

25 Hill is already a regional hit in Akron, selling 5,000 DVDs at the derby championships in July and another 7,600 through an exclusive deal with local ACME Fresh Market stores. Bernsen is currently on an 11-city tour to promote the film's 2012 nationwide release through his Home Theater Films imprint, holding a screening/Q&A and a derby race at every stop.

Bernsen has an idea for a supernatural thriller he'd like to do in Kipling, and he plans to return to Ohio in February or March to finally shoot the long-gestating family comedy *Three-Day Test*.

"I'm making movies with community and I'm selling them to community by engaging community," Bernsen observes, "and that all gets back to Main Street, back to mom and pop, to a larger picture of what I think is important these days." ▼