

MPTD Interview with Life of a King's Eugene Brown

Leslie Green: Welcome to Reel Talk with Film DC. This is your host, Leslie Green, Director of Communications with the DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also known as the DC Film Office.

This month we're here with Eugene Brown, whose story is the inspiration behind the new independent feature "Life of a King," starring Cuba Gooding, Jr., award winning actor. The film is an inspiring story of an ex-convict who starts a chess club for at-risk youth in DC's Deanwood neighborhood. We're so happy to have you here. Thank you for joining us.

Eugene Brown: I'm glad. It's my pleasure to be here.

Leslie: First, let's tell our listeners a little bit about your story. In your words, what is the film about?

Eugene: The film actually is about...I break it down to identifying a problem, finding a solution, and what was the planned program of action. The problem was coming home, working in the school system. Checking "yes" in the box that I have been formerly incarcerated, and being dismissed from the school system. I think that was the problem.

The solution was finding a place to continue having a chess club and a place for the kids to come to. And then, continuing on to have changed someone's life that had no intentions of playing chess but saw the benefits of it, and really got engaged in it and goes on to college.

It shows a complete paradigm shift of at-risk youth -- what they can do when they're exposed to a new way of life.

Leslie: Why chess? What made you pick that as something to get those kids off the street?

Eugene: Chess was a game that saved my life while I was doing time in prison. You have various groups in prison, groups that...you have religious groups. You have Islamic groups. You have stick-up groups. Everybody practicing whatever they're going to do once they're released, and chess was my niche.

Later on, in prison, I was just known as "the chess man." Because when guys had come in from other institutions, and were playing chess for...that were gambling. I had people that would stake me against those people, like guys from Florida or from Cincinnati that had a reputation of playing chess. I was being staked against a lot of those players.

When I first learned, it was during the Bobby Fisher era. It was like in '69, when I really first got introduced to chess, serious chess.

Leslie: What was it like to learn that your story was going to be made into a film? What was that like?

Eugene: I didn't know I looked that good.

[laughter]

Eugene: I'm serious.

Leslie: With Cuba Gooding Jr. playing you, right?

Eugene: Yeah. It was such an inspiration that for him to pick the story up and when Jake Goldberg -- he was the director -- when he introduced it to Cuba as far as him doing it, the monetary equivalent to what he's used to getting, Jake said he was surprised when he accepted it.

So that showed his warm heart, as far as the significance of the movie, and the monetary value of the story was outweighed. The monetary value, so I was inspired for him to see what I had seen because making a living off of chess, I would have never made it as far as that was my livelihood, to be a chess instructor or be a chess mentor.

Leslie: How involved were you in the actual production of the film? Did they consult you at all?

Eugene: Yes, they did. One of the things that I really had to correct was the fact that...in LA, they wear a lot of head rags and all of that and I said, "They don't do that in DC."

They kind of stripped that away. And some of the languages they were using as far as terminology, that I was able to do, but mostly though, it was the fact that I think Cuba kind of knew that my background, where I came from, and I think he saw the ABC Up Close interview that I did in 2002. That kind of gave him a fit as to my demeanor and he was able to start on it.

Then after I met him, he was able to really put his heart into it.

Leslie: How accurate do you think the film was in portraying your story?

Eugene: That's a good question. Let me share this with you. All of it wasn't true. Some of it had to be kind of a back door approach to some of the things that did happen. But they kind of construed it through another way that it would format without involving some real people. I think the incident where...you saw the movie?

Leslie: Yes, I did see it.

Eugene: Where Peanut was killed?

Leslie: Mm-hmm.

Eugene: I actually had a guy that was in the chess club that had called me late one night about two o'clock, and wanted me to come and pick him up. I said, "Pick you up?" He had just gotten out of a stolen car and he had told me the whole thing that had happened.

I went and picked him up and the next day, the car was in a chase with the police, and one of the guys got killed and another one was actually paralyzed. They kind of used that like a Peanut scene.

Leslie: What did you think of the film? How did Cuba do in portraying you?

Eugene: He did an excellent job, I think. I'm finding out that most actors, when they embellish themselves into a character, if they find there's a character that they can't get across, I don't think they accept that. I don't think they accept it.

He knew that it was a...I think if I sat and talked to a group of people for any length of time, somebody would say, "He's from the street." He kind of knew that I was from the subculture.

A lot of my early lessons were still from the subculture -- even when I sold real estate. I sold to a certain...I was one of the leading real estate agents, but it was that my target market was people from the areas that I came from.

Leslie: You said you did get a chance to meet Cuba Gooding Jr., and spend time with him and all of that. What was that like, preparing him for the role?

Eugene: It didn't take that much, but I'll tell you one thing that really inspired me was the fact that when I first met him, they were in the chess house that they had stimulated in LA. When he saw me, he came right across the room and shook my hand, and he said, "I am so proud of you, Mr. Brown."

He said, "To meet a guy that's been in prison and take his own money out of his pocket to say that we are losing too many kids to the street." He said, "That's why I took this." He said, "These are the types of films that I like." He said, "I encourage you to keep on doing what you do." He said, "Man, I just can't get over the fact that I met you." He was like that and I was so glad to meet him.

He acted like he was so thrilled to meet me.

Leslie: You have an incredible story. Tell us a little bit about what you've been up to since founding...You founded the chess club that they portray in the movie. What have you been doing with the chess club since then?

Eugene: Since the movie?

Leslie: Since you founded it.

Eugene: Oh, well, we have...like now, we have three different components going. We had a summer program through the district, summer job work fair and we were able to hire four people.

We've actually had people that we started out with in 1992, '93, that's been through our program and have come back to be employed with us and have chess programs that they are the chess instructors.

We have a program at [inaudible 10:09] Recreation Center. Now, we also have a program at a library...I forget the name of the library and we also have a program at [inaudible 10:23] Academy...Rosedale Library.

We've taken kids to the nationals three times. We've been invited to the Cosmos Club on Massachusetts Avenue to play their group. The Cosmos Club is a very ritzy club where some of

the older...some old...As a matter of fact, their shoe on policy is attire -- necktie and a jacket -- before you can even get in there.

It was a good experience to take some kids there. We met a grand master. And just to be able to be a grassroots organization and be able to take kids on summer trips. Take them on a summer trip and be able to expose them to some experiences that they never thought they would be able to see.

Like nice hotels -- a five star hotel -- and just make sure that when we take them out, to be able to one day, when we come back so they can have a choice. Like [inaudible 11:41] , you've seen how people live on this side.

Through chess, what are some of the things that it's going to take you to have to live like that?

Our program is not just about so much pushing chess pieces. It's being able to take the parallels of life, the parallels of chess, and use it into your everyday life. So what I've actually seen is "Sleeping Beauties." That's what I call them, and to unwrap their gift. Their gift is to be able to...for them to see their opening game, and be able to start envisioning their end game.

Because chess is a three-part game -- the opening, the middle and the end. I think the kids that are very gifted are the kids that in their opening game, in their early life, to know that they are going to one day take over their parents' business. Or, one day know that they are going to go to college.

The car that they travel on is very clear. So to be able to take a youth from public housing and to not allow him to go into the same pitfalls that I went into by exposing them to, "You can sell drugs." They say, "What?" I say, "Yeah. I wish I was a drug seller." They say, "Mr. Brown, I don't believe that." I say, "Yeah."

Put them in the car, took them down to CVS, took them in the back, had the pharmacist to come out and say, "This is a drug seller."

All those guys that you look up to, that you think are so much in your neighborhood because they got a big car and all. I said, "One day, when they get locked up and the time that they end up doing, they could have went to school and got a pharmacist license. So if you ever think about selling drugs, right now, start preparing yourself to be a pharmacist. I bet you, I guarantee you, you won't want for anything."

"Those cars that you want, those clothes that you want, and you can sell drugs. This is what they do." They work in a drug store. So, without this paradigm shift, without them being able to see things different, just like on a chess board. I've seen kids bent over, thinking that they're in a bad position, and they are two moves away from winning.

And so, this is what opens up the vision of understanding that all situations are not lost. That's a word that we don't even use. You're either learning lessons or you're teaching lessons in chess. You never lose. Chess is the only game that can't be won. It can only be played.

What do you win in life? Every time you win something, there's another prize that you're trying to get. After you get that, there's another prize. There's another. And then, once you get

comfortable, instead of you winning it, then you start losing. Because it seems you start going back down the hill.

It's an on-going process.

Leslie: It's an incredible story and I know people's lives have been changed just from being in your presence and learning from you, learning how to play chess, and I'm sure people's lives are going to be changed just by watching the film.

I know that the film is being screened on Wednesday, January 15th, tomorrow, at 6:00 PM at the Ark, in the Southeast. You're going to be there, right?

Eugene: Yes.

Leslie: You'll be there and answering questions and people having the opportunity to meet you and some of the people who worked on the film. We're excited for that. After the screening, where you can view the film, you can watch it on Video On Demand. It's going to be on iTunes, and I believe there's going to be some more information about the film on our website as well. So check out our website at www.film.dc.gov.

Again, Eugene, I want to thank you for joining us.

Eugene: Thank you so much.

Leslie: Absolutely. Again, this is Reel Talk with Film DC. This is your host, Leslie Green, signing off. Don't forget to check us out on the web at www.film.dc.gov. Like us on Facebook at [Facebook.com/filmdc](https://www.facebook.com/filmdc) and follow us on Twitter at [DCFILMOFFICE](https://twitter.com/DCFILMOFFICE). Catch you next time.