

JENNIFER WOLFE

GROWING APPRECIATION

Documentarian Michael Kuehnert Works to “Save the Farm”

Documentary filmmaker Michael Kuehnert says he first heard about the Los Angeles South Central Farm in 2006, when he picked up a newspaper and saw a photo of his friend John Quigley sitting in a tree with fellow activist Julia Butterfly Hill. “I didn’t know anything about the farm, but I took my camera and went down there and started asking questions.”

What Kuehnert discovered was a 14-acre urban farm—the country’s largest—facing demolition from developers, who had been sold the land by the city in a closed-door deal. Defending the farm were the 350 families who had cultivated the land for more than 14 years, along with a handful of activists including Quigley, Hill, Daryl Hannah and Alicia Silverstone.

The documentary short “Save the Farm” presents the eleventh-hour struggle to save the Los Angeles South Central Farm from destruction. Using a Sony DSR-PD150 camera mounted with a Sennheiser microphone, Kuehnert acquired more than 50 hours of protest footage and interviews to create the 30-minute documentary.

“It’s not that I necessarily wanted to shoot in SD,” Kuehnert explains, “but it was a dirty, dusty environment, and I needed to be able to shoot hours and hours of footage without having to worry about downloading P2 cards and that sort of thing.”

Initially concerned about raising awareness of the South Central Farm’s plight, Kuehnert produced four shorts for cable network Current TV, but he eventually realized that the story could be used to help educate people about urban farming in general and inspire them to create their own urban farms.

“In some ways, I made an advocacy film as opposed to a true documentary,” Kuehnert says.



Julia Butterfly Hill addresses the media from her tree sit perch, along with Daryl Hannah and John Quigley. The three of them sat in the tree for more than three weeks. This perch was used as a “lookout,” to spot the police when the raid took place and as a tool to bring media awareness to the farm.



Above: Daryl Hannah and a young farmer girl light a candle for the vigil. The vigils were held nightly during the tree sit. Hundreds of people would walk around the perimeter of the farm chanting, singing and playing instruments. There were also ceremonies and nightly performances. | Below: Activists getting arrested the day of the evictions. These activists had been camping out at the farm for weeks. They participated in the peaceful protest in an act of nonviolent civil disobedience by sitting in the middle of the street and blocking traffic.



“The central question this film asks is, ‘Why are people sitting in trees and risking arrest to save an urban farm? Why is it so important?’ It was always my intention to bring the conversation to the fact that urban farms are the solution to so many of the problems that we face today.”

Using a Sony DSR-11 deck to digitize the

footage for ingest into Apple Final Cut Pro, Kuehnert struggled with editing for several months before he recognized that he had become too close to the project. “The main thing I learned through this process is that I needed to have talented people around me,” Kuehnert says. “This project started as a one-man band,

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—Michael Kuehnert, director

but it ended as a team. I had so much support, from my editor, from my business partners, from everyone.”

Kuehnert handed off the footage to editor John Rantz to shape into a story, and it quickly became apparent that “Save the Farm” was meant to be a short rather than the feature-length documentary Kuehnert had originally envisioned. “In the end, because of digital distribution, the shorter format opened up a lot more possibilities for the film,” he says.

“I was very fortunate to find Cinema Libre for distribution, because they are focused on social-issue documentaries, and now ‘Save the Farm’ has a much wider audience than ever anticipated. In addition to festival audiences, it’s available on Hulu, Netflix, iTunes, Amazon and Video on Demand, and we’ve been able to make it accessible to colleges and universities as well.”

A winner of the Best Short Documentary prize at the Cleveland and Tulsa international film festivals, the Special Jury Prize at the Nashville Film Festival and the USA Film Festival in Dallas, and the Mark Haslan Award from Toronto’s Planet in Focus Film Festival, “Save the Farm” has screened at nearly 20 festivals across the country. “Surprisingly, it’s done really well in the Midwest,” Kuehnert comments.

“I had made a couple of short documentaries before ‘Save the Farm,’ but this was the first time I really dove into filmmaking in a big way,” Kuehnert says. “It was nerve-wracking, you know, walking up to celebrities I’ve never met and interviewing them, but I believed in what I was doing. I was on a mission.” **dv**