

Inside, Under the Stars: The Drive-in Returns to Davenport

Written by Mike Schulz

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"We go to drive-ins all the time," says 23-year-old Arron Lorenz of his family, which includes father Randy, stepmother Terri, and half-siblings Nicholas, 13, and Courtney, 9. "It's one thing we can do together where we don't have to be *quiet*."

With a laugh, the Blue Grass, Iowa, resident continues, "We're not quiet people by nature, so going to the movie theatre doesn't always work out that well. Not because we get unruly, but because we *like* to be able to talk, you know? We like to whisper and poke and make fun of and jab and *laugh*. And we can't do that the way we want to at [Showcase] 53. Not without interrupting everybody *else's* experience."

If all goes according to (revised) plan, the Lorenzes will soon be able to make as much drive-in noise as they want, *whenever* they want.

Located off West Locust Street and north of West Lake Park in Davenport, the family's Reel to Reel Drive-in - co-owned by Aaron, Randy, and Terri - is scheduled to open in the spring of 2009, and will stand as the first operational outdoor theatre the Quad Cities area has seen since the closing of Davenport's Oasis drive-in in 1987.

The two-screen Reel to Reel was originally slated to open this *past* April, but Mother Nature nixed that plan. "The rain was the big delay for us," says Arron. "We basically have to move every square inch of dirt on our entire eight acres, and we were told [by contractors] that unless the ground's solid six inches through, it's not even worth coming out."

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"So we were shooting for April," he says, "and May, and June, and *July*, and it finally got to the point where it didn't make economic sense. It wasn't fiscally responsible to open this year, because by the time we got opened, we'd only have six weekends of *being* open."

Yet Arron admits that while the delay has been frustrating, it does have an upside, as it gives the family even more time to prepare for the drive-in's unveiling. "And we want to come out swingin'," he says. "We don't want to do it halfway."

What Do *We* Want?

Arron characterizes his family as unapologetic "movie people. We go to the movies, we go to the drive-in, we patronize every place that we can go to - it's just something we love to do." And it was actually the arrival of another Iowa drive-in that served as the Reel to Reel's inspiration.

"Dad was driving us by the Grandview Drive-in before they'd opened" in 2007, says Arron, "and we saw the big sign: 'Coming Soon.' Well, Dad grew up in the Quad Cities, so he was here when they had drive-in theatres, and he just said, 'How great would it be to have one back in the Quad Cities? How much fun would it be to be able to go to one? How much fun would it be not to have to drive to *get* to one?'"

The Lorenzes agreed that a Quad Cities drive-in sounded like an ideal family enterprise, despite none of them having previous experience in owning or operating a theatre. (Arron works in Web development for the Quad City Candle Company, Randy is a floor manager for Walgreen's, and Terri is a registered nurse at Genesis East.)

Before you can run a drive-in, however, you need a *locale* for a drive-in, which Arron says was

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finally found after "a lot of looking.
It's tough to find eight acres of ... rectangular property that's within
reason

"We contacted a lot of people," he continues. "My dad has a couple of people that he's done deals with - buying land and stuff like that - so he just put the word out. But honestly, this particular property, I was just driving by it, and I saw that it was for sale. I saw the 'For Sale' sign, I pulled in, I took a walk around the property. And it's eight acres, and rectangular, and where we're putting our first screen is already sloped downwards It's like it was *screaming* to be a drive-in.

"And it's right here in town," he adds. "I mean, Locust Street and [Interstate] 280? We can't really ask for a better location."

Arron and his family purchased the property, and then began the process of determining not only what patrons would be looking for in a Quad Cities drive-in, but what the *Lorenzes* were looking for. "We didn't think we could come up with a proper business model without first knowing what we wanted out of the business," says Arron. "And so we sat down together around the kitchen table with a legal pad and said, 'What to
we
want out of a drive-in movie theatre in the Quad Cities?' You know, 'What are
we
willing to pay? What do
we
want when we go there?'

"I guess our goal is that our family experience - what *we* expect out of it - will translate to what *y
ou*
would want from a movie theatre."

From the start, the Lorenzes knew they wanted a two-screen setup, which the Davenport site easily had room for, and they wanted to run double features on each of those screens. "Having two screens gives us some flexibility," says Arron. "And we basically want to split [the features] up between 'adult' and 'kid.' We want one screen that gives you the opportunity to bring the kids out, and another screen where teenagers and couples can come out and have a date night."

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They also wanted the Reel to Reel's hours of operation not to be limited to the weekends - "We are going to be open seven days a week," says Arron - and to accommodate as many movie-goers as possible. "Screen one, which is gonna be our larger-capacity screen, holds just a little shy of 300 cars," he says, "and the second screen is gonna hold a little over 200."

But Arron says that the Lorenzes also had very specific ideas about the amenities the Reel to Reel would offer. "One thing that Dad and I said when we started researching the idea, before we even knew what a 50-pound bag of popcorn kernels cost" - roughly \$18, according to a July report on National Public Radio - "was that we wanted to be able to provide people with an indoor-theatre experience."

In addition to the screening of first-run features, Arron says that the Reel to Reel's proposed perks will include "a topnotch concession stand with a full-service kitchen. We're gonna offer made-at-the-shop pizza, chicken, burgers, steak sandwiches The building is two stories: The second story will have the projectors and all the equipment, and the bottom story holds the concession area and the kitchen."

That second-story area, he adds, has been also furnished with a window through which, says Arron, "you'll actually be able to see from the concession stand up into the projection room. Because we know that part of it's a nostalgia thing - you know, people are gonna be excited just to be able to go back to the Davenport drive-in. So that's one of the reasons we want people to be able to see the projectors. We want people to see some of the old-time equipment."

And the edifice also holds another perk for drive-in attendees. "We've got 16 bathroom stalls, I think," says Arron. "It's not gonna be like anything you've seen. My stepmom is the reason we have so many bathroom stalls. She said, 'I don't want to walk into a bathroom and have it be too crowded.' I mean, with 500 cars, we could easily get a thousand, fifteen hundred, two thousand people on the property at any given time, so we didn't want you to have to fight over two or three bathroom stalls."

Yet Arron believes that the best way to give patrons an outdoor experience reminiscent of an indoor one is by offering "top-quality sound. We're using a high-quality transmitter so you'll be able to hear the lowest frequencies and the highest frequencies, and we're not sure if they're gonna be ready when we open, but we've got outdoor subwoofers that we're planning to use at

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the base of each screen.

"One thing with FM transmitters," he continues, "is that the frequency of an FM signal just doesn't go that low, so when you're sitting in the theatre and you get that good vibration from an explosion or something, you don't *get* that at the drive-in. Most car stereos just don't provide that ... that *boom*. So we want to have the outdoor subwoofers to use in combination with your car speakers.

"We just wanna be able to be inside while being under the stars."

Grass-Seeding It

There's one element of the indoor-theatre experience, however, that Arron says the Reel to Reel is *not* planning to mirror.

"It was a Sunday night," he recalls of a recent trip to the cineplex, "and I paid \$9.50 each for me and my girlfriend, Jackie, to go see Batman." With concessions, he continues, "our grand total was 42 bucks," and while the Lorenzes haven't yet determined the drive-in's admission price, Arron states that "our goal is to get a family of four - two parents, two kids - in and out for under \$50.

"The concession stand's where we'll make all our money - don't get me wrong," he continues. "The theatres take about 75 percent of our ticket price, so the concession stand's what's gonna keep us afloat.

"But we're not out there to make a million dollars out of this. You know, the stuff doesn't *cost* a lot. It doesn't cost \$5.50 to make a little bag of popcorn, it doesn't cost \$5 for a 32-ounce cup of pop. We're not out there to

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gouge
anybody."

Despite the Lorenzes being new to the business of theatre ownership and management, Arron says they've been fortunate to find considerable assistance in getting the Reel to Reel on its feet. "We took a pretty hard crash-course real early," he says, "because it definitely isn't one of those things where you just throw it together. We visited drive-ins, but basically what we did was we went to the people who run the drive-ins and say, 'What do *you* guys do?'

"And you'd be surprised," Arron continues, "because as there's so *few* of them, it's a very communal feeling that we got from everybody. Nobody that we spoke to thought that we were encroaching on their business, and we're not

trying

to do that. You know, we think that everybody's got their own niche, and ours is going to be the Quad Cities."

Of course, the original plan was for the niche to be filled a year sooner. Yet while the main construction on the Reel to Reel won't begin until early next year, all the blueprints have been drafted, construction on the rainwater run-off fence surrounding the property has begun, and, barring more record-setting interruptions from Mother Nature, the springtime process of getting the drive-in up and running should only take, estimates Arron, "six to eight weeks.

"Honestly, what's gonna take the longest is growing the grass," he adds. "Sodding that much land isn't really an option for us." Working with a budget of roughly \$500,000, he says, "that'd be fifty, sixty thousand dollars extra. So we're gonna grass-seed it."

Arron understands that the push to 2009 may have been disappointing for area drive-in fans. "But I think my dad and my stepmom and myself are the most disappointed that it didn't open this year," he says. "We're tearin' our eyeballs out. We're looking forward to having it, we're looking forward to working it, we're looking forward to showing our first movie on it."

Plus, of course, they're looking forward to the freedom that drive-ins allow.

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"There's no 'Shhh!' at the drive-in," says Arron with a laugh. "You know? We want this to be a destination point for people to come, and have dinner, and *then* watch the movie.

"The thing with drive-ins is it's an *experience*," he continues. "You don't get to the drive-in five minutes before the movie starts. You come early to get the best spot, you want to be able to get food, and throw the Frisbee around You want it to be an *event*

. I mean, the movie, at that point, is almost an afterthought. It's like, 'Oh, we're gonna go have dinner and play outside, and ... hey! There's a couple of movies showing!'"

For more information on the Lorenzes' Reel to Reel Drive-in, visit DavenportDriveIn.com .