

Richfield Native Wins Emmy for Documentary

by Kristen Mooney

As a young child, Revere graduate Matt Choma grew up listening to his father, Paul, tell story after story on the patio of their Richfield home. Listening to these tales – many of which were as simple as the histories of the trees in their yard – sparked Matt's passion for storytelling. By his own accounts, Choma grew up knowing how to spin the yarn of a good story, but he never dreamed that talent would take him as far as the Emmys – until it did.

This September, Choma won an Emmy for a compelling documentary he produced about legendary quarterback Chuck Ealey, who played for the University of Toledo from 1969 to 1971.

As a civil engineer, Choma admits he knew little to nothing about filmmaking prior to this project. In fact, after graduating from Revere High School in 1990, Choma went on to pursue degrees in both civil engineering and geology at the University of Toledo, where he was a champion track runner. He later got his master's degree in civil engineering and was named Toledo's Young Engineer of the Year in 2004. But even with all his success in the engineering world, Choma still was not satisfied.

"Engineering pays the bills, but it doesn't make your heart sing," he said.

So, Choma teamed up with Andy Langenderfer, a fellow UT grad and engineering coworker, and they began brainstorming film projects that could benefit the university's recruiting efforts. Then, in what would become the first in a long line of "serendipitous events," as Choma refers to them, the two men



Matt Choma is holding the Emmy he won.

stumbled upon the story of UT graduate Chuck Ealey.

"We thought, 'What if we take this kernel of history and expand on it?'" Choma recalled.

As quarterback of the University of Toledo Rockets, Ealey led the team to 35 consecutive victories from 1969 to 1971. During that time, the Rockets won three Tangerine Bowls, and Ealey became the winningest quarterback in the history of college football. When he graduated, Ealey had won 53 straight games, starting as a junior quarterback in high school at Notre Dame.

But what made Ealey's story so compelling was not just his impressive record – it was the fact that he earned all those accolades in the midst of crushing adversity. As a black athlete during the 1960s and '70s, Ealey's achievements were consis-

tently overlooked, and he struggled to be recognized at the college and professional levels.

As a black quarterback Ealey was passed over during the NFL draft despite his undefeated record. However, he had a determined spirit and went on to play professionally in Canada, where he later retired and was inducted into the Mississauga Hall of Fame. Today, Ealey is a regional director for Investors Group, a financial planning company based in Canada.

"The more we got into (Ealey's) story, the more we realized it was truly amazing," Choma recalled. "We thought it was something we should share with as many people as we could."

Although neither Choma nor Langenderfer had ever produced any kind of film, they immediately decided to try to turn Ealey's story of triumph into a documentary. They began researching cameras and lighting techniques in an attempt to learn as much as possible about the filming process. Looking back, Choma said it was a miracle that they got the project off the ground.

"We knew absolutely nothing about making a documentary," he said. "That's how naïve we were to think we could just do something like this."

What followed was a series of additional "serendipitous events," beginning with a chance encounter with WGTE, Toledo's PBS affiliate. The station contacted Choma, who, at the time, was president of the local chapter of the American Society of Civil Engineers, about doing an interview for an unrelated project on engineering. Choma agreed and then approached the station about the possibility of picking up his documentary, which was already three years in the making.

"We were still struggling to get over the hump," Choma said. "I asked if they would be interested in talking about our project, and everything clicked from there."

Eighteen months later, *Undefeated: The Chuck Ealey Story* became a reality, airing for the first time on Thanksgiving Day 2008. The film's themes of hard work, reward and overcoming adversity struck a chord with viewers, and the documentary was nominated for an Emmy from

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the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

After learning his film was selected as one of the four finalists for the award, Choma made the last-minute decision to attend the awards ceremony in Cleveland on Sept. 12. “(At first), I didn’t want to go because I didn’t want to be disappointed,” he said.

And as it turns out, he had nothing to fear. *Undeclared: The Chuck Ealey Story* won its documentary category, emerging from the finalist round as the top vote getter.

“When they made the announcement, I was just elated. I jumped up and said, ‘Woo hoo!’” Choma recalled, laughing. “It was just a tremendous feeling.”

Choma looks back at the journey with a bit of awe: After hundreds of 20-hour days and endless fund-raising efforts, the film that started out as a far-fetched idea in the minds of two UT graduates became an Emmy award-winning documentary.

Now, Choma plans to take the story and develop it into an educational aid for at-risk youth. Ealey’s story would be the center of a packet given to kids ages 12 through 18 in schools, Boys and Girls Clubs and other organizations that would teach youth the importance of humility, leadership and education – all values Chuck Ealey exemplified during his career.

“This (documentary project) has evolved into so much more,” Choma said, adding that the film was also the inspiration for the Chuck Ealey Foundation. The foundation was created to support students who “exhibit Chuck’s undefeated spirit” and have overcome adversity in their lives. Run by two other UT graduates, the foundation gave its first scholarship last year.

“Chuck (Ealey) was the nexus point that brought us all together,” Choma said.

Choma credits his family and his upbringing for much of his success, noting that his siblings, Jim and Tracy, who both graduated from Revere High School, are also talented writers and storytellers. His parents still live in Richfield, and his mom, Barbara, has worked as a cashier at Revere Middle School for 25 years. “She’s the glue that holds us all together,” Choma said.

Choma also looks to his wife, Penny, and his two young children, Sydney and Jack, as sources for support. At 37,

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Celebrating the Emmy award and the success of Chuck Ealey are (l-r) Chuck Ealey, Director Ray Miller and Executive Producers Andy Langenderfer and Matt Choma.

Choma still has many years left in his career as both an engineer and a filmmaker, and he said he is intent on pursuing more film projects.

Already, he is working on a TV pilot that focuses on what it is like to be an engineer – “You write about what you know” – as well as a documentary about the history of the Maumee River and the way it shaped Northwest Ohio.

However, Choma said his first documentary will always hold a special place in

his heart: For as much as *The Chuck Ealey Story* inspired him in his own life and career, it also resonated with the thousands of other people who viewed it.

“(The film shows) that in spite of injustice, people can prevail,” Choma said. “If you put the time in and the hard work in, good things can happen – are supposed to happen. It’s nice to see the good guys win.”

Just like they did at the Emmys this year. ∞

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