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Features

Carlisle's answer to Spielberg: writer and director Gabrielle Savage Dockterman

by Carolyn Armistead



Gabrielle Savage Dockterman directs actors while shooting a scene from *Woodcutter*. Clockwise from left: Danny Glover, David Strathairn, Dockterman and Zoe Weizenbaum. (Photo by Carole Segal)

Many Carlisle residents know Gabrielle Savage Dockterman as the wife of School Committee member David Dockterman, or as Jake's mom, the woman who served as hair stylist backstage at last year's seventh-grade play.

But most people are unaware that Dockterman is also an award-winning writer, producer and director who recently completed filming and editing her first feature film, *Woodcutter*. The film stars such Hollywood notables as Danny Glover (*The Color Purple*, *Lethal Weapon*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*), Ron Perlman (*Hellboy*, the TV series *Beauty and the Beast*), and Linda Hamilton (*Terminator*, the TV series *Beauty and the Beast*). One would be tempted to feel star-struck in her presence if she wasn't so warm and down-to-earth.

Woodcutter, which is based on a story by Ken Miller of Washington state, also features the skills of screenwriter Nancy L. Babine, who (coincidentally as it turns out) also lives in Carlisle. The film tells the story of a Vietnam veteran named Jake Neeley (played by Glover) who is haunted by memories of the war and lives in self-imposed exile in the Pacific Northwest. A former member of his platoon (played by actor David Strathairn) comes to visit, bringing a 10-year-old daughter (newcomer Zoë Weizenbaum) who is half-Vietnamese. The man is dying of lung cancer from exposure to Agent Orange and wants to leave his daughter in Jake's care. What follows is an unexpected journey toward healing.

Highs and lows

In what has ended up being a four-year process from start to finish, Dockterman says she has experienced a staggering number of highs and lows. The highs began coming in profusion, however, as soon as Danny Glover signed onto the project, she says. As for Glover, choosing to star in the film was apparently an easy decision. Glover himself lost his younger brother — a Vietnam vet — to lung disease caused by Agent Orange.

Although it proved to be a daunting challenge, finding the girl to play the Amerasian child left with Glover's character was also a high point. After turning away hundreds of young actresses from the U.S. and Canada, Dockterman was days away from the start of filming when a friend with an acting studio in Beverly suggested she take a look at a girl named Zoë Weizenbaum, from Amherst. Although she was not even actively seeking film roles, the half-Jewish, half-Chinese girl was exactly what Dockterman was looking for, a child "who could stand up to Danny Glover yet also pull on your heart strings," she says. (Although Dockterman can take full credit for giving Weizenbaum her first film role, director Stephen Spielberg has also taken notice. Weizenbaum will soon be appearing in Spielberg's adaptation of *Memoirs of a Geisha*.)

The next big step in the process will be marketing *Woodcutter* to distributors, who hopefully will bring the film to a theater near us. Soon we will likely find ourselves in a darkened theater, scanning the credits for the names "Dockterman" and "Babine," and enjoying the thrill of having a local connection to the world of movies.



Carlisle writer Nancy Babine joins *Woodcutter* director Dockterman in the store owned by Linda Hamilton's character in the film. (Courtesy photo)

Although a person in Dockterman's line of work might feel it necessary to live in New York or Los Angeles, she has made Carlisle her home for the past 12 years. "I was born in California, but grew up mostly in Montana. I've been [in New England] since I came to go to Harvard. I just never left," she says. Sometimes she has no choice but to do her work elsewhere (like the three months she spent in Vancouver filming *Woodcutter*), but whenever she can, she works close to home.

Drama versus science

Like many people who grow up to be filmmakers, Dockterman says she was interested in the field as a child. "When I was in fourth grade, I wrote a play that I thought I would shoot around my house with witches and things. And I was always into drama but I always thought I would be a scientist," she says. So Dockterman went to Harvard University, where she was an honors graduate in engineering and computer science. She did, however, have a few doubts along the way. "There was one semester at Harvard when I realized I didn't want to be a theoretical physicist I actually thought about taking a semester off to go to L.A. and audition," she says with a laugh. "But my mother freaked out, so I didn't do it."

Instead, after graduation Dockterman combined her interests in drama, storytelling, computers and education, and created interactive educational multi-media presentations for schools and museums. She has, during her impressive career, created projects for organizations such as the Smithsonian Institution, the National Science Foundation, and the U.S. Department of Education. One of Dockterman's interactive videos, called "Minds-On Science," is on permanent display at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

One of Dockterman's favorite projects was an interactive CD-ROM called "Rainforest Researchers" which won a number of awards, including a Parents' Choice Award. Dockterman was executive producer and even appeared on-camera for this project, which was shot among native people on a remote island off the coast of Sumatra.

"It was amazing — surreal, like going back 10,000 years in history," she says. "They wore loincloths and had tattoos, and we lived in their longhouse with them."

By this time, Dockterman had realized that her favorite part of the job was the writing, directing and producing element, so this was to be her last non-film project. In 1996 she created Angel Devil Productions (based in Carlisle), specifically to pursue feature films.

Soon afterward, Dockterman and Babine met. "I was looking for writers and someone told me the best writer in Boston is Nancy Babine, so I looked her up and she lived in Carlisle. I couldn't believe it! It was total serendipity."

Ken Miller's original story crossed Dockterman's desk in September 2000. She put her finishing touches on the film during editing just last week. "I'm so glad I didn't give up, because there were times I almost gave up," she says of the four-year journey. But now that the film has been completed? "I'm so happy. I've been dancing around the house all week long," says Dockterman. "It just turned out even better than I'd hoped."

So is it too soon to ask "what's next?" Apparently not. "Nancy and I are working on some script ideas," she says. "I'm hoping to have another script ready by the time this comes out."

Screenwriter Nancy L. Babine contributes to Woodcutter

Nancy L. Babine didn't start out thinking of herself as a screenwriter. In fact, she was a stay-at-home mom, nurturing three daughters as they went through the Carlisle school system and feeling, as she puts it, "happy and content."

But over the years, as she heard herself encourage her daughters to dream big, take risks and pursue the things they were passionate about, it dawned on her that she wasn't taking her own advice. "So I gave some serious thought to what I wanted to do and what interested me," she

says.

In 1995, when her youngest approached junior high age, Babine decided to focus on something for which she'd always had a knack but had never pursued professionally. She decided to write screenplays.

At first, it was something of a clandestine activity. "The computer was in a basement room, so nobody knew what I was doing. I worried, 'What if someone reads this?'" she recalls. "If I heard somebody coming, I would quickly switch screens."

But soon, her confidence grew. She took classes, read books and joined a screenwriter's group in Harvard Square. It was through this group that Babine was introduced to fellow Carlislean Gabrielle Dockterman and the two began working on projects together.

Although she has written other screenplays, including ones that have received contest recognition, *Woodcutter* is Babine's first produced screenplay. "We both saw its potential," she says. "

Together with the writer of the original story — Ken Miller — Babine and Dockterman crafted the screenplay that is now the feature film. It was a successful collaboration for many reasons, says Babine. Miller knew his subject — he himself is a Vietnam vet acquainted with reclusive veterans living in the woods. In addition to their skills, Babine and Dockterman were able to offer a professional distance from a story that was close to his heart.

"The reason it worked is because it was all about the movie. It wasn't about our own egos or own agendas, but what would make the best movie," she says.

Although the entire process of writing a screenplay is rewarding, Babine admits there's nothing like the thrill of seeing her words come to life. She was able to experience this first-hand when she made a trip to Vancouver during the last week of filming *Woodcutter*.

After months of writing about a cabin on the side of the mountain, Babine found herself following a rutted, muddy road to the site where the cabin had been built for the movie. "It took my breath away. It was not just a word on a page anymore," she says. "Then I heard the dialogue coming out of the actors' mouths. It was thrilling. I remembered writing those words!"

— *Carolyn Armistead*