

## A message for all to hear



“In the Jungle’ promotes the idea that the more we can share our unique experiences, the more we can find connection through them and discover that we are more alike than we think. I think our world can use a strong dose of this kind of empathy right now.”



— Chelsea Kania, Screenwriter

Chelsea Kania was inspired by her dad Rick (left) and uncle, both of whom were born and grew up with profound hearing loss, which presented many challenges including them being bullied.

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## Screenwriter believes story of dad’s childhood can inspire change

By Maureen Vander Sanden  
CONTRIBUTOR

**L**ate this past summer, when the otherwise near-empty Wisconsin School for the Deaf is full of commotion, a fight breaks out in the cafeteria.

As a crowd of middle schoolers cheer loudly, one student has another pinned down on the ground and is on the verge of throwing a punch.

But the Delavan-based, specialty state school is not in session, and these are not students.

They’re young actors set in the 1970s working on an important project – one that supporters hope will “be a force of change.”

“In the Jungle” is a short film from an award-winning screenplay written by Muskego native Chelsea Kania, 38.

The script centers on Eric, a middle school boy who is an outcast among his peers. He has two hearing aids, a giant pair of glasses, and finds solace in his drawings.

On the school day depicted in the

film, the class lesson is “Survival of the Fittest,” and Eric is faced with the school bully. He will soon have to decide whether he’s a lion, a gazelle, or king of the jungle.

Eric’s character – and the deeply-woven symbolism of the jungle throughout – is inspired by the screenwriter’s dad, Rick Kania, and her late uncle Allan.

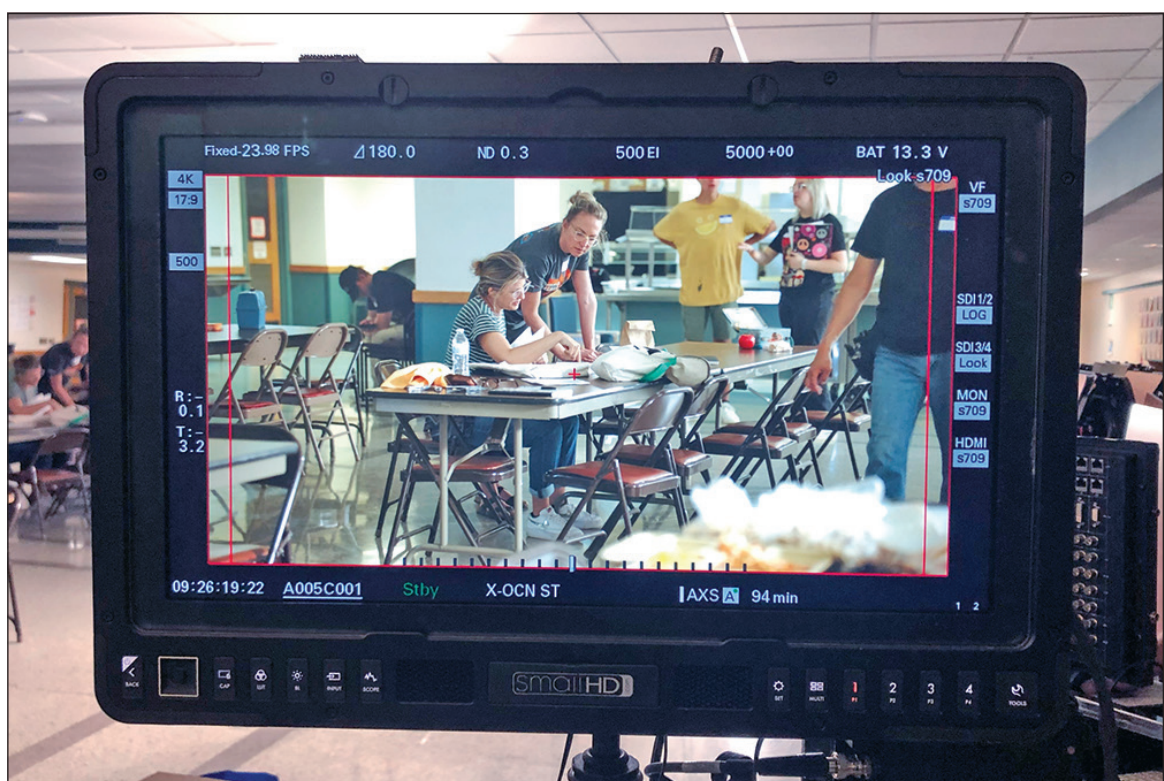
Both were born with profound hearing loss and experienced additional hearing loss throughout their lives. The brothers grew up attending traditional schools with little to no support and were often bullied, according to Chelsea.

Rick said he was routinely called “retarded” and “deaf and dumb” – words he is relieved are not used today. But even being referred to as “disabled” makes the 65-year-old regional planner cringe.

“I prefer to define (hearing loss) more as ‘a challenge,’” he said in a recent phone interview.

Like Eric, Rick has proven himself a champion.

People in the deaf community



COURTESY MICHAEL OGNISANTI, ITJ DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Southern Lakes Newspapers

Screenwriter Chelsea Kania and director Ky Dickens work behind the scenes at Wisconsin School for the Deaf during filming for ‘In the Jungle’ this past summer.



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Rick (holding the fish) relied on books and lip reading to learn, as well as help from his mother. He went through traditional school with little assistance, including at UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee, where he graduated with degrees in landscape architecture and urban planning. Today he is a principal planner for the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.

want to be treated with respect and dignity, he explained.

Rick lets his intelligence and other characteristics define him, rather than his hearing loss, just as his brother Allan did.

Allan had a more severe hearing impairment and suffered from constant tinnitus which caused sleep deprivation, Rick said. Still, Allan was highly intelligent and worked tirelessly to help improve the quality of life for all, including children with disabilities and impairments.

### An important story

For Chelsea, who is now based in London, writing “In the Jungle” began simply as an exercise in empathy.

“...it was a bit like family therapy...just trying to imagine the childhoods they had without any expectations of (the screenplay) becoming a film,” she wrote in an email.

The film’s director, Ky Dickens, was the driving force behind bringing her screenplay to life, Chelsea said.

Dickens, according to Chelsea, is

a brilliant, award-winning director whose films are focused on shifting public policy and culture.

“She immediately understood ‘In the Jungle’ was an important deaf story and that it had a widely relatable message about being an outsider and finding your inner power even when the whole world feels like it’s working against you,” Chelsea explained.

“It was important to me that the experience of my dad and uncle transcended to this level,” she added. “And I believed in Ky’s vision for the film.”

For Rick, his hearing loss seemed to only make him more determined to succeed. School was a challenge for him with no interpreter and a hearing aid that certainly didn’t work miracles.

In grade school, it often caused sores inside his right ear canal, delivered high-pitched tinnitus, and bullies would pull on its cords. Rick relied on books and lip reading for his class instruction, and with the teacher often facing the blackboard, he said there was much he missed out on.

He recalled crying a lot in first grade at Milwaukee’s Tippecanoe Grade School, especially when he was first learning how to read, write and solve math problems.

“No one could figure out why I was crying all the time. I realized later it was because I could not hear well, even though I had a hearing aid. I was at the seat of my pants trying to figure out what I was supposed to do,” Rick explained.

He has since upgraded hearing devices twice. In high school, during a loud pep rally, he lost his hearing in his right ear completely and was fitted with a behind-the-ear hearing aid for his left ear that was gentler on his canal and a lot less cumbersome with no need for cords. Still, his brain needed to adapt to the new device, and his body had to relearn proper balance with hearing on a different side. The adjustment did not come without challenges, according to Rick.

Now completely deaf, today he hears better than ever after having a cochlear implant in 2005.

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It took some serious adjusting, but with the cochlear, Rick joyfully laughed when he recalled the day it worked. “Oh my god, I could hear the birds whistling. I could hear humming on an electrical line. I could hear my zipper ticking,” he said. “I had to ask my wife repeatedly, ‘What are those sounds I never heard before.’” The implant was a success.

Malcolm Engel, who plays Eric in the film, also wears cochlear implants. Rick was on set the day of filming when there was a confrontation between Eric and his bully. He said he could relate to Engel’s character in several ways. Chelsea said she knows it made her father emotional. “It must’ve been completely surreal,” she said of her dad watching the scene unfold.

“I think it’s incredibly brave of him to reopen his difficult past, because storytelling can have an amazingly healing ripple effect,” Chelsea said. “If we see someone is brave enough to tell their story, we’re inspired to tell our own stories. So, I am very proud of him,” she added.

In an email, Chelsea said that through the process of filming and marketing her script, she often was told “All deaf stories deserve telling,” but she would like to expand that to: All outsider stories deserve telling. “‘In the Jungle’ promotes the idea that the more we can share our unique experiences, the more we can find connection through them and discover that we are more alike than we think. I think our world can use a strong dose of this kind of empathy right now,” Chelsea said.

**‘Short ... (but) complex’**  
“In the Jungle” is two years in the making since Chelsea first teamed up with her director.

Now in the final stages of production, producers hope to have the film completed sometime in February. Sound work and animation



MAUREEN VANDER SANDEN *Southern Lakes Newspapers*

**Tichigan Lake Lions announced at their Dec. 9 Christmas party they would provide \$12,000 toward ‘In the Jungle’s’ post-productions costs. From the left: Tichigan Lake Lions President Dave Hrycay, Mike Duhamel, Rick Kania, deaf interpreter Julie Holma, and Lions John Palmer and Troy McReynolds.**

are the current focus. Disney animator David Stodolny is executing the animation using his young daughter’s original artwork to bring Eric’s drawings to life. Sound design will be completed by a top-notch team. The film’s dynamic sound will shift between Eric’s perspective with hearing aids to the imagined jungle world of his drawings, according to Chelsea. “So, for a short film, it’s pretty complex,” the screenwriter stated. Knowing it could cost \$150,000 or more to make the film a reality, Chelsea said “In the Jungle” has proven to be a passion project. One of her main goals is to make the film freely available

to institutions for educational and community purposes. “I want it to be seen by as many people as possible,” she said. At each phase of the production, Chelsea said she has worried about how they would raise funds to get to the next phase. “But that’s the thing about passion projects – you just take them one bit at a time and thank your lucky stars for the amazing people who help it along.” She credited Julie Holma, a Waterford based deaf and educational interpreter, for leading the post-production campaign, which is still in the works. As a lifelong hearing advocate and mother to a hard of hearing child, Holma said

she was instantly drawn to Chelsea’s script and the film’s potential to bring awareness to the mental health crisis of deaf children and adults. “Mental health statistics for deaf adults (due to bullying, isolation and language deprivation as children) are tragic,” Holma said. “For me, the film will bring national and international awareness to the struggles of our deaf children, and we hope to use this film to improve mental health outcomes of our deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind children.”

**Support from the deaf community and beyond**  
HEAR Wisconsin came in as the fiscal sponsor for production in 2022, according to Chelsea.

The non-profit organization provides services and resources to children, adults and seniors who are deaf and hard of hearing. HEAR Wisconsin’s support is special, the screenwriter said, as its services were the few provided to her dad and uncle back in the 1950s. The Tichigan Lake Lions Club most recently joined the film’s roster of supporters, which, in addition to HEAR Wisconsin includes the Wisconsin School for the Deaf, various other Lions clubs, and private citizens. During the civic club’s annual Christmas party held Dec. 9, Tichigan Lions committed \$12,000 toward the film’s post-production costs. One member, Lion John Palmer, said he felt moved to give additional funds, stating that the film is close to his heart as someone with a deaf brother.



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**Rick Kania holds his daughter, Chelsea, in the ‘80s. Since that time, his hearing device and computer have been significantly upgraded.**



SUBMITTED PHOTO *Southern Lakes Newspapers*

**Chelsea’s uncle, Allan Kania, was born with profound hearing loss and eventually lost his hearing. Later in his life, he suffered from constant, severe tinnitus, which also caused sleep deprivation. Still, he attended traditional school and excelled. Rick Kania said his late older brother was extremely intelligent.**

Those types of connections have resonated throughout the filming, which Chelsea said is touching. She’s also “honored and humbled” by the Lions’ support. She cited the emblem of Lions International, which states: “Facing the past with pride and the future with confidence, looking in all directions to render service.” “I can’t help but think how perfectly our missions align,” Chelsea said. “The generosity and kindness of Wisconsinites is well known all over the world, but it warms my heart to see it in action.”

## For more Information


To follow the film’s progress or to secure it as a free, educational resource visit [www.inthejunglefilm.com](http://www.inthejunglefilm.com), or follow Chelsea Kania on Instagram @chelseamonrana for milestone updates. Anyone feeling inspired to contribute and be named a producer of “In the Jungle” can email [kania@chelseakania@gmail.com](mailto:kania@chelseakania@gmail.com).



SUBMITTED PHOTO *Southern Lakes Newspapers*

**Award-winning screenwriter Chelsea Kania said writing “In the Jungle” began as an empathy exercise – trying to imagine what it would be like to grow up with hearing loss. It’s based on the experiences of her dad, Rick (left) and uncle Allan, who inspired her.**

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