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Ryan Coogler and the 'Fruitvale Station' effect
Writer-director Ryan Coogler didn't grow up dreaming about becoming a filmmaker, but he has been writing since boyhood.

By Pam Grady

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Now that he has made his first feature, "Fruitvale Station," a drama focused on the last day in the life of Oscar Grant that has already won prizes at Sundance and Cannes and is likely to be in contention come awards season, writer-director Ryan Coogler is on top of the world. He is enjoying the ride, but, since it started, he has not been able to go back to his day job as a counselor at San Francisco's juvenile hall.

"It's frustrating," the 27-year-old East Bay native says. "It's unfortunate. I really miss it. I miss the stability of that job. I miss the kids."

At the Sundance Film Festival in January, "Fruitvale Station" star Michael B. Jordan marveled at his director's demeanor in the middle of the festival circus. Coogler is a movie
junkie with a master's degree from the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, but, says Jordan, "He's just doing what feels right. ... All of this stuff doesn't matter to him in a good way. It doesn't faze him at all."

Coogler did not grow up dreaming of being a director. That came later, after novelist Rosemary Graham, his teacher in a creative writing class at St. Mary's College, suggested that he write screenplays. Until then, he just knew that, whatever he did, he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his parents, juvenile hall counselor Ira and Joselyn, director of finance at PICO National Network, a faith-based group dedicated to improving communities through organizing.

"My parents have been a strong influence in my life," Coogler says. "I have the most incredible parents in the world. They came up in East Oakland, and they had nothing. They never did anything illegal. They put their backs to each other and raised me and my little brothers, both in Oakland and in Richmond.

"Since I could remember, I wanted to be like both of my parents, especially my dad. I thought he was the coolest guy in the world in his job. When I was young, he would take me to juvenile hall, and the kids were my age. I would kind of hang with the kids and then hang with his co-workers. They were like my uncles and aunts.

"As I got older, I realized that I really liked what he did. And we'd often be out and about and run into kids that he had. They would give him the biggest hugs. They loved my dad, and I realized why. I saw what he did at that job and the impact he had on some of those kids' lives."

Coogler credits his family, school and sports for keeping him on the straight and narrow while some of his friends fell into trouble. As a youth, he ran track for the Oakland Police Athletic League. He played youth football with the Berkeley Cougars and West County Spartans and continued playing in high school at Berkeley's St. Mary's College High
School. He was good enough to get a football scholarship to St. Mary's College. All the while, he was laying the groundwork for his future, with a lifelong habit of storytelling.

"I've been writing since I was a baby, since I learned how," he says. "My mom always made fun of me, because she said I had an overactive imagination. She said I would always remember things in a really descriptive way. I was telling stories all the time. I always liked doing it, but it wasn't something I was conscious of."

Director Ryan Coogler, on the platform of BART's Fruitvale Station, knew how he wanted to make the film after watching the trial.

**Three shorts**

Coogler has made three shorts - "Locks," "Fig" and "The Sculptor" - in addition to "Fruitvale Station." Now he thinks about making movies all the time, an impulse that led him to "Fruitvale Station" when he first heard about Oscar Grant's fate on New Year's morning 2009.

"I want to make films that have a social impact in my world," he says. "So it was pretty
much immediate that I thought about it. Then after watching the trial, I really knew how I wanted to do it. I was trying to think of how I could have an effect, how I could do something so that stuff like this has less of a chance of happening.

"Oscar's become a symbol for a lot of things," he adds. "He's precious not only to his family, but to the Bay Area. When something like this happens, who the person was always gets lost."

Coogler never knew Grant, but he has known others whose lives ended too soon. Shortly after Sundance, he was in Los Angeles for meetings when he saw a headline about a triple murder on the Las Vegas Strip. He did not read the story, but thought of a friend there whom he hadn't seen for a while. When he came out of his meeting, he noticed a missed call from his father. Then his mother called and he learned that one of the victims in the Las Vegas shooting was rapper Kenny Clutch, the friend he had thought of earlier.

"He was somebody I knew since I was 3," Coogler says. "I went to elementary school with him. We went to high school together for a year. He was one of the earliest friends that I can remember having. He was killed. For me, sadly, it happens a lot. A lot of people I grew up with were killed or incarcerated.

"There have been days when I get calls from the Weinstein Co. and I get collect calls from my close friends who are locked up, asking me about how Cannes was or asking me to send them a movie poster."

**Only the beginning**

"Fruitvale Station" is only the beginning for Coogler, but he expects all of the movies in his future will have one thing in common: Like "Fruitvale," they will have a social impact.

"Making movies is hard," he says. "Making this movie is the hardest thing I've done in my life. If I'm going to be away from people that I love, if I'm going to give so many hours of myself, killing myself to do something, it should be something that I'm really passionate about, that I really care about.

"On a personal level, these are the stories I want to tell, these are what I respond to. The
only thing I know how to do is make a movie about something that I care about." {sbox}

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