

LOCAL

# Survivors recount stories of life and death in documentary

SAMANTHA MAGEE Miramichi Leader  
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Andrew King, right, chats with Mark Williston, the son of an Escuminac Disaster survivor Theodore Williston.

Photo: submitted

MIRAMICHI – Most Miramichiers have heard tell of the Escuminac disaster, from their parents or even grandparents, it's an integral piece of Miramichi history and for the first time ever, those who survived are sharing their stories on film.

“I don't think it's ever been told like this before,” said Andrew King, the director, camera man and editor of the documentary entitled *Still Fishing: Beyond the Escuminac Disaster*.

“This is a documentary that actually goes inside the homes of these people and hearing the survivors telling their stories. Of course it's part of local history and (viewers) will be able to experience something that relates to their area in a genuine setting.”

The Escuminac disaster occurred on June 19, 1959, and into the following day, the 20th, and is one of the worst hurricanes ever recorded to hit the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Colossal waves and howling winds battered unprepared salmon-fishing boats and their crew, many family-operated, mercilessly. Thirty-five men and boys drowned at sea, unable to return safely to shore. Twenty-two fishing boats were lost or destroyed.

There is a memorial at Escuminac wharf listing names of the lost men and boys.

King is Miramichi River Tourism Association's technology partnership officer and the lead on the 28 minute-long documentary. Terry Power and Cindy Trevors of the association were key collaborators and are listed as producers in the film's credits.

The documentary is King's first mid-length feature, he has done other video work during his time at school but nothing of this nature, he said.

King graduated from Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., with a degree in film and media and is now responsible for producing promotional videos, doing marketing and updating the Miramichi River Tourism Association's website.

King said the idea to do the documentary emerged after he accompanied local lobster fisherman Mark Williston and his crew on their boat for the first day of lobster fishing season on April 29 last year.

Williston, the son of Escuminac disaster survivor, Theodore Williston, and his crew were talking about the hurricane of 1959, which intrigued King. It seemed the topic, although more than 55 years old, was still a lively point of discussion.

"When I went out there I learned about the story, this disaster and it kind of went from there."

King's footage of lobster fishing was particularly well-received and between that and the re-telling of the disaster, it gave him the idea to pursue the topic, which was timelessly compelling, in documentary form.



Andrew King getting some shots during opening day of lobster fishing season last April. **Hide Caption**



Andrew King getting some footage on one of the lobster fishing boats. **Hide Caption**

Escuminac Disaster survivor Max Martin being interviewed by King. **Hide Caption**



Survivor Max Martin stands next to his fishing boat.**Hide Caption**

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When it came time to interview the handful of fishermen featured in the documentary, some survivors, some children of survivors, King said having friend and co-worker Terry Power there for the first couple of interviews was beneficial.

“It was really helpful to have him there because he lives in the Escuminac area and is actually neighbours with one of the Escuminac survivors. So since he was there with me, the comfort level was already there.”

King did have to conduct some interviews solo and said one thing he learned during the interview process that helped put his subjects at ease was asking “do you think this is a story that should be told?”

“They all said yes and once they say that the ice is broken and now it’s up to them to tell the story. It helps me get past thinking that I’m intruding, I mean, I’m interviewing them in their own home but once you say that, it clears the air.”

A handful of fishermen and even David Adams Richards are a part of the documentary, a celebrated local author who is a Miramichi history buff.

“He’s interested in it and he’s written about fishermen before so we thought he would have a nice perspective,” said King.

He said talking first-hand with the survivors and sons of the survivors was both insightful and rewarding.

“It gets emotional like one guy was crying and it’s a tough thing to talk about. It’s a small town and what you do up there, at least back then, is you fish. A lot of people on those boats were family.”

Alphonse Doucet, a fisherman, was 17 when the hurricane hit. He was a hand on his father’s boat and saw his dad, the boat’s captain, pitched into the turbulent water.

“His dad didn’t know how to swim,” said King. “He kept sinking like, six feet under water so (Alphonse) put a rope around him and pulled him up and saved his life.”

The Doucets all survived the disaster and Alphonse and his father have been fishing ever since. It’s men like Doucets and Willistons that helped inspire the documentary’s name, Still Fishing.

“I’m happy I went out that first day (of lobster fishing season) because the documentary wasn’t really planned,” said King.

There will be a screening of the documentary in the city in the future, although King said he hasn’t firmed up the details just yet. He hopes to enter the documentary into some film festivals or perhaps try to get it aired on television if possible.