

JAKE

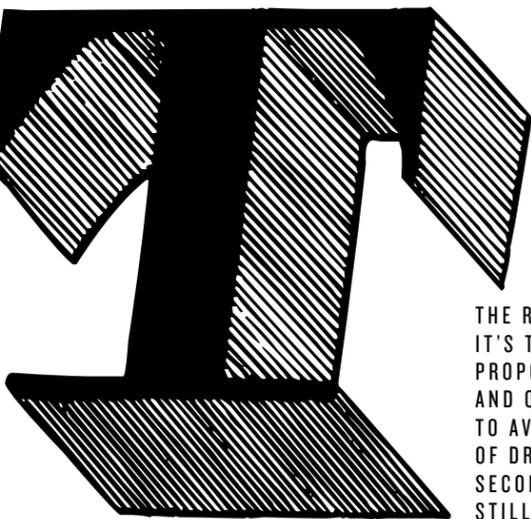
PHOTOGRAPHY NINO MUÑOZ

INTERVIEW

WORDS TIFFANY BAKKER

ONE OF A GROWING BUNCH TO BOAST A TAYLOR SWIFT SONG PENNED ABOUT HIM, GYLLENHAAL TALKS UP HIS NEWFOUND SENSE OF CALM, HIS FAVOURED ROLE AS UNCLE AND JUST WHAT ALL THAT OSCAR BUZZ REALLY MEANS.





THE RAIN IS POURING DOWN IN TORONTO. IT'S TORRENTIAL – OF NOAH'S ARK, BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS. TORONTONIANS SCUTTLE IN AND OUT OF DOWNTOWN BUILDINGS, TRYING TO AVOID THE STORM, BUT IT'S THE SORT OF DRIVING RAIN THAT SOAKS YOU IN FIVE SECONDS, SO THERE'S REALLY LITTLE POINT. STILL, THE SATURATED CONDITIONS HAVE NOT PUT A DAMPENER ON THE HUNDREDS OF FILM FESTIVAL FANS GETTING UTTERLY DRENCHED IN A QUEUE SNAKING AROUND TWO BLOCKS.

The reason for their unfettered enthusiasm? They're in line for a sold-out session (having a ticket in Toronto is like having Willy Wonka's golden ticket) of *Prisoners* – a thriller starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Hugh Jackman, and directed by Canadian auteur Denis Villeneuve. It has Oscar written all over it.

While the film premiered the night before to a rapturous response, it didn't stop Gyllenhaal from sitting in the audience feeling nervous and worried that no one would like it as much as he did. He whispered as much to his cinema buddy (who may or may not have been rumoured girlfriend, and *Sports Illustrated* model, Alyssa Miller).

"I said to my friend in the middle of the screening, pretty pathetically actually, 'Do you like it?' And they were like, 'I'm losing my mind.' So I thought, OK, good."

A day later, the rain has disappeared and the sun couldn't be brighter if it tried. Gyllenhaal is a little tired – a festival will do that – but on good form. Those doe eyes that drive women (and more than a few men) berserk are strangely compelling in real life. He's an affable bloke with a certain gentle, contemplative side. But there's also something of a wicked glint. It makes for a good combination.

Gyllenhaal likes film festivals. They're a chance to hang out with friends he hasn't seen for a while – a school reunion for the rich and famous. Decked out casually in navy T-shirt, dark denim jeans and Nike high-tops, and wearing the very Brooklyn beard he seems to sport whenever he's not filming, he's one of those men (David Beckham's another) who can combine such casual attire and still look like they just stepped out of, well, *GQ*. He's also super fit, and unbelievably lean.

This state of affairs has come in preparation for his next role – said to be the story of a Mount Everest expedition gone wrong – and he's been existing on a diet mainly of green juices and truckloads of kale. He's also given alcohol the

temporary flick – offering that the end results are a clear mind and increased energy levels.

Going to extremes for a role isn't unusual for Gyllenhaal. He likes to be prepared. For 2012's underrated *End of Watch*, he researched his role as a South Central cop by riding along with the LAPD. For *Prisoners*, he studied hours of police interrogation footage, and read and watched everything he could on child abductions.

"You can have talent, but that's not enough, not in any business," he says, scoffing a bowlful of blueberries. "I really believe that freedom is on the other side of discipline."

At 32, Gyllenhaal's carved an impressive career, largely due to some unexpected film choices.

He's starred in such movies as *Donnie Darko*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Proof*, *Jarhead*, *Zodiac*, *Rendition* and *Brothers*, among others. In 2006, he was nominated for an Academy Award for *Brokeback Mountain*, alongside Heath Ledger.

They've been eclectic choices and, aside from a disastrous foray into blockbuster territory (*Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, anyone?), he's managed to avoid superhero flicks and franchises.

Gyllenhaal feels *Donnie Darko*, *Brokeback* and *End of Watch* changed his life in various ways.

"These movies are markers on my path and life. We all have them in different ways," he says. "Mine are a little absurd and happen to be movies, but all I have is the experience of those movies and they've all been extraordinary in their own way."

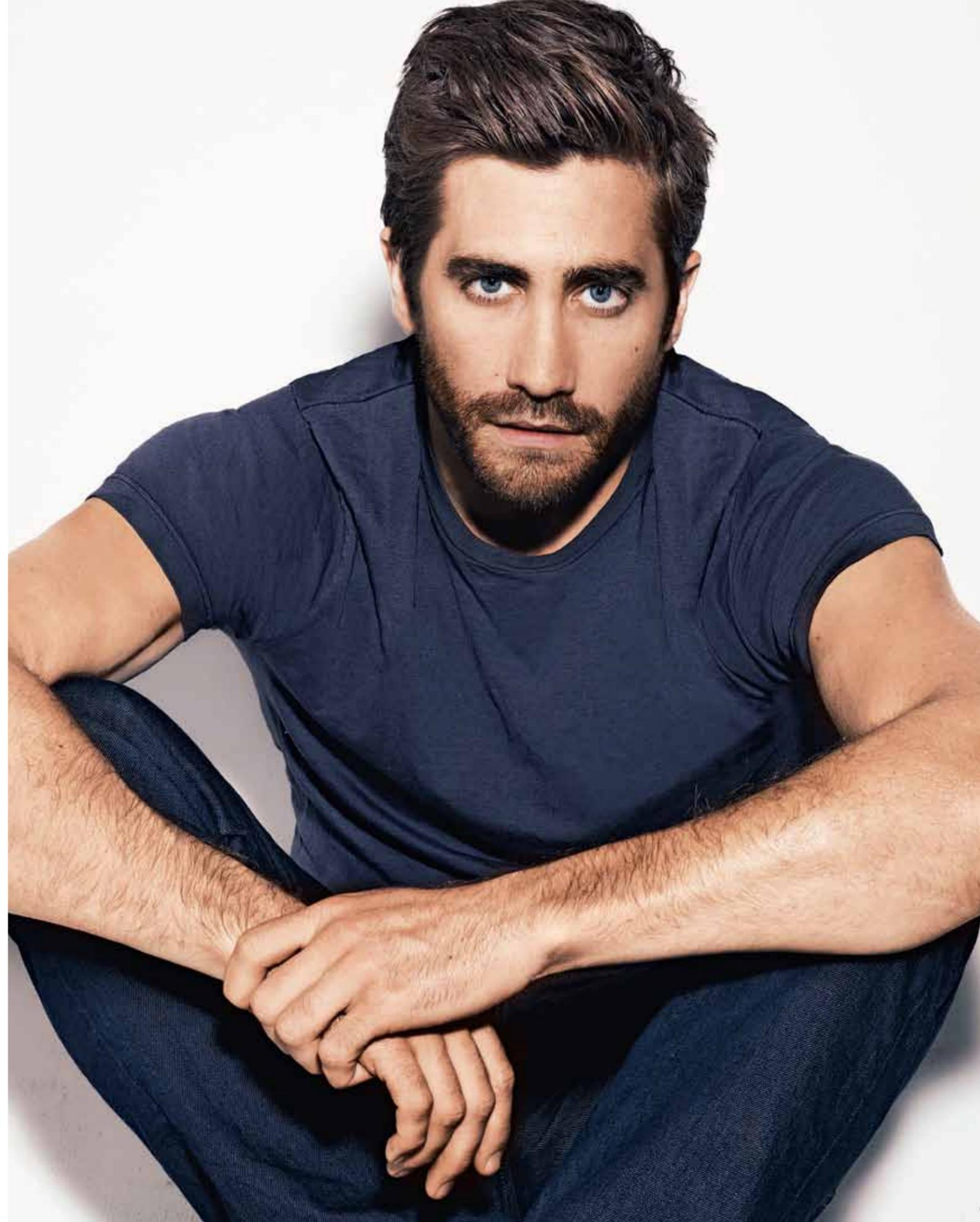
It's clear he loves what he does, but is under no illusions that he's performing brain surgery.

He likes a laugh, and tries to keep things light on set, even when the material is dark. "I'm devoted to what I do and I take it seriously," he says, "but I have a sense of humour, too."

Just to be sure, we checked in with his *Prisoners* co-star Hugh Jackman.

"Oh, Jake's hilarious, he's a cheeky bugger," says Jackman. "We became good friends, and he's a good mate to have."

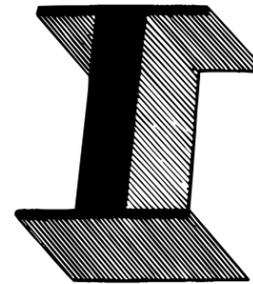
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FROM TOP, CLOCKWISE:

As a troubled teenager in *Donnie Darko* (2001); a political cartoonist in *Zodiac* (2007); alongside Dustin Hoffman in *Moonlight Mile* (2002); as *Jarhead*'s US Marine Anthony Swofford (2005); with Heath Ledger in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005); as Detective Loki in *Prisoners* (2013).



It turns out Gyllenhaal has a long-held daily routine before he gets ready to go on set. He listens to the cheesiest pop music he can find, and dances. Yep, the man who once said listening to Mumford & Sons made him feel “all was OK” with the world, gets down to Britney, Rihanna and Miley.

“I really, really, love listening to really poppy music,” he says, gleefully. “I play a lot of intense characters and going the other way can help. Sometimes if you listen to something that’s the complete opposite of the feeling you’re having, you can dive even deeper. Somehow you’re not thinking so much. And then bam, you’re in it.”

For his role in *Prisoners*, we imagine he’ll have been listening to Kylie, Celine or Shakira. To say the film is bleak is an abject understatement. It’s harrowing, gut-wrenching, devastating – and that’s just the first 15 minutes.

Gyllenhaal plays Detective Loki, a quiet, intense man with a mysterious past, who heads up an investigation into the search for two missing girls who vanish during a thanksgiving celebration. Jackman plays Keller Dover, the desperate father of one of the missing girls (both he and Gyllenhaal give standout performances), and Paul Dano – also exceptional – perfectly portrays the creepy suspect. Viola Davis, Terrence Howard, Maria Bello and Melissa Leo round out a stellar cast.

Not since *The Silence of the Lambs* has a film carried such a sense of foreboding and dread – a palpable sense of anxiety, impossible to shed, not only over the course of its lengthy (but worthy) two and a half hours, but even when you venture back into the real world. It’s a tough one to shake.

Gyllenhaal had never met Jackman before filming started, and admits to being cynical, initially, about the Aussie actor’s reputation.

“I’d heard so many things about him, as we all have, that he’s such a good guy, such a nice bloke, but I had my own skepticisms

about that,” he says, smiling. “But when I worked with him, the amazing thing about it, annoyingly so, is it’s just very true. He’s a good man. And as an actor, he’s so humble. I mean, given the position he’s in... People say success brings out who somebody really is, and he’s a deeply good man. He’s not performing it.”

Still, Gyllenhaal went in with the aim of seeing how far he could take it during scenes with his co-star. “I like to be provocative, and I wanted to get under his skin.”

Jackman, though, would not be deterred. “No matter how far I took it, he loved it. And an inherent part of that is him being Australian because most Aussie actors I’ve worked with, particularly culturally, are up for that kind of game, that kind of fight. Like, let’s get into it, you know? Heath [Ledger] was like that too. Yeah, I’d really like to work with Hugh again.”

The admiration is mutual.

“Jake is a true artist,” says Jackman. “What he brings to this character is amazing. He has created one of the most interesting detectives I’ve seen on screen and is an incredibly hard worker, relentless in his determination to get the most out of every scene, every day.”

Gyllenhaal says he’s found an easy way to shed the skin of the character he’s working so hard to get into.

“I’m obsessed with food. I love eating in general, but if I’m somewhere on location, I tend to find one restaurant and weirdly will eat one or two things that I love. Then I’ll know I’m going there at the end of the day to eat that thing. It’s like a strange catharsis to me. I don’t know what it does,” he laughs, “but it kind of breaks the boundaries of something that’s different to what my character would eat.”

Food is an important, almost spiritual, part of Gyllenhaal’s life. He’s a passionate cook (“it calms me”), though he has no signature dish (“just fresh food”).

“I grew up with food at the centre of life and with a mother who believed in growing fresh produce and that food is love.

“The process of watching something grow, bloom, then cultivating and eating it, is an extraordinary process in patience. I love it.”

Best mate Chris Fischer – a well-known New York chef – has a farm in Martha’s Vineyard, and the two often spend time there.

“That’s my favourite place to be. The perfect weekend would be hanging out with Chris on his farm or with a number of my friends, growing food, picking food, eating it

and cooking meals. Surrounded by big tables of people I love. That’s all I need.”

It’s well documented that Gyllenhaal is close to his family. His father Stephen is a film and TV director, his mother Naomi a screenwriter (who was nominated for an Oscar for the 1988 film *Running on Empty*), and, his sister, of course, is Maggie Gyllenhaal – his co-star in the cult classic, *Donnie Darko*.

As children, they both loved being taken to the theatre by their mum, and Jake recalls one production in particular: *The King and I*, in Los Angeles, starring the King to end all kings – Yul Brynner.

“I don’t remember the experience – I just remember the feeling of it. I remember watching Danny Kaye, as the court jester, and

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just thinking, I kind of want to do that. That looks really hard and really fun.”

In the end, though, his main motivation to act was to copy his big sister.

“You watch your older sibling and you look up to them, and she was acting, and performing, and I loved that,” he says. And so he joined in, and liked the way it felt when people responded well. “Like, if I would do something that was funny, I could feel that response and I liked that response. By nature, children are performers in a way, and that was encouraged.”

His sister, on the other hand, thought he was a complete pain in the arse for following in her footsteps.

“Yeah, she did,” he sniggers, “but you know, that spurred me on more, just to annoy the hell out of her.”

Ma and Pa Gyllenhaal kept it similarly real and, unlike far too many stage parents,

“At the time, I mean, I was devastated, and I was angry and frustrated, but thank god, because there are techniques and things I think you learn as a child, and as an actor at a young age, that you can’t kind of undo to evolve.”

Jake and Maggie are now each other’s “biggest fans”, and share a strong understanding of the industry. “She knows I get what it’s like to do this job. It’s hard to shake off a character, to shake off a process and the habit of waking up in the morning and having a job, and then not having a job any more, so we definitely share those things.”

Still, having a family so entrenched in the entertainment business (Maggie’s husband is actor Peter Sarsgaard) has in the past, he admits, been both “good and bad”.

“Sometimes we’d get bogged down in work.”

Since Maggie became a mother (Jake is an uncle to seven-year-old Ramona and one-

Gyllenhaal revels in being an uncle (“I love them so much, it’s crazy”) – hardly surprising given that Ramona and he seem to have been cut from the same cloth. “My niece and I are so similar, and it blows my mind actually. She’s taking over the mantle as the cheeky one. I’ve passed the baton on,” he says. “I hope I have anyway. It doesn’t look so good on a 32-year-old man.”

He may be letting go of his childhood, but he’s also seeing off the professional insecurities that often plagued him.

“It’s taken me a long time over this career – 20 years and counting – to understand what it is a director needs and to service their vision but I feel I’m really starting to learn how to do that. I feel like I really know how to do my job, better than I have in a long time.”

And it shows, hence the fact his role in *Prisoners* is already gathering Oscars steam. This embarrasses Gyllenhaal – he’s not good with compliments. “I mean, it’s so nice when people say, ‘Hey, it’s being talked about in that way’, and you make many movies and no one ever says anything like that so that’s a good thing to hear, but really,” he laughs, “I take it with a pinch of salt.”

He treats the notion of his “celebrity” in the same way. From the outside, it seems like a strange world to inhabit.

Gyllenhaal smiles. “It’s a strange world for me on the inside, too.”

Over the years, the tabloids have been obsessed by his romantic life and ravenously documented his relationships, particularly those with high-profile women such as Kirsten Dunst, Reese Witherspoon and Taylor Swift. While the word on the street states woman of the moment is swimsuit model Miller, we’ve been given strict instructions not to talk about it. Still, Gyllenhaal is fully aware, from spending time with police officers and military personnel – people who put their lives on the line every day – that some intrusion into who he’s shagging is a small price to pay.

“I have no problem creating my boundaries, and hopefully being respectful and loving and vice versa with other people. Right now, where I am in my career, I feel so good about life and where it’s headed. I’m excited about it all, so the word difficult does not come into play with this. In fact, it doesn’t come into play with any job within the entertainment industry,” he says with a wide smile. “It’s a pretty fucking fantastic job.” ■

Prisoners is in cinemas October 17.

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weren’t going to let their son drop everything for a possible acting career and risk careening head-first into a phalanx of child star bad behaviour.

“They knew the business and really wanted me to get an education,” says Gyllenhaal, who studied Eastern religion and philosophy at New York’s Columbia University. “They believed that if I wanted it enough, and it was really something I had a desire to do, then I had plenty of time to do it. They were of the thinking that there’s really only one time in your life when you can go to school, and have that experience. So I’m grateful to them.”

His parents would let him audition for parts, but would rarely allow him take a role even if he got it (a notable exception being when, as an 11-year-old, he made his big screen debut playing Billy Crystal’s son in *City Slickers*).

year-old Gloria Ray), he feels they’ve found a happier balance.

“We’re getting much better at just being a family. That is what’s important to me and to my sister now. When kids come into a family and you’re no longer the youngest generation, everything changes and work becomes less important.”

Just last week, he and Maggie had a one-day crossover in New York (despite the fact they both live there), and made sure they met up.

“It was the only time I could see my nieces and I hadn’t seen them in a little while,” he says. “We sat there before we had dinner, just me and my sister, and in that moment, we talked about work or whatever. But then ultimately, we all sat down to dinner and were just a family together and none of that stuff came into play. Because you know, kids don’t care what movie you’re in.”

