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Award-winning filmmaker learned cinematic basics at Sacramento State

Sacramento State alum Ryan Coogler's first feature-length film, *Fruitvale*, has won top honors at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. He captured both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award in the category of U.S.: Dramatic. Read the full list of awards winners and watch an archived version of the ceremony at www.sundance.org/festival.

The film by Coogler, who earned a business degree at Sacramento State in 2007, vividly recounts the last day of Oscar Grant, a 22-year-old unarmed black man who was killed by a transit policeman at an Oakland BART station. The *Hollywood Reporter* termed it a powerful telling of “an awful tale, fraught with political, social and moral weight symbolic of numerous contemporary ills.” Actor Forest Whitaker was struck by Coogler’s previous short films and became the movie’s executive producer.

Several studios bid for the film, for which The Weinstein Co. won distribution rights for $2.5 million. According to the *New York Times*, Harvey Weinstein is expected to back *Fruitvale* as a contender for next year’s Academy Award competition. When Tom Rothman presented the Grand Jury Prize to Coogler and Whitaker, the former chairman of 20th Century Fox predicted: “This will not be the last time you guys walk to a podium.”

*Fruitvale* prevailed over 15 other titles selected by Sundance Institute, which Robert Redford established in 1981 to develop and promote talented independent storytellers.

Coogler’s filmmaking talent was spotted by Theatre & Dance Professor Roberto Pomo in 2004, when Coogler transferred from St. Mary’s College. “This wonderful young man was part of our pilot film studies program,” Pomo says. “He took all our courses and excelled as a writer/director.” Pomo and Communications Studies Professor Steve Buss prepped Coogler for admission to USC’s graduate film program.

“Ryan sent me his final film project *Fig*, about a mother forced into prostitution in order to feed her young daughter, for review,” Pomo notes, “and I thought ‘This young man is going to become the next Spike Lee.’”
Pomo, whose extensive experience includes directing theater and working as an assistant at Sundance Institute when he was a student, is struck by the compassion that complements Coogler’s passion for filmmaking. “I spoke several times by phone with Ryan about his previous short film, Fig, and could sense the depth of his commitment to that story.”

The multitalented Coogler excelled at football for three seasons as a standout Hornet receiver, ranking 18th in school history with 1,213 career yards. As a two-time Big Sky all-academic selection and honorable mention all-Big Sky Conference as a senior, Coogler was the obvious choice to speak at the 2007 Causeway Classic luncheon.

Coogler is grateful for his Sac State experience. “I liked playing football and learned how to make films under professors Pomo and Buss,” he says. “They were instrumental in my getting into graduate school.”

His previous award-winning short films include Locks (Tribeca Film Festival, Dana and Albert Broccoli Award for Filmmaking Excellence), Gap (Jack Nicholson Award for Achievement in Directing), and Fig (HBO Short Filmmaking Award, DGA Student Filmmaker Award).

The Richmond resident currently works as a guidance counselor for troubled youths, as did his father. But those days appear to be numbered as he contemplates an increasingly bright future as a major filmmaker.

“My advice to people working in the independent landscape is not to think about making a sale but making a film that’s true to your goal and has the impact on the audience you desire,” Coogler says. “All the other stuff will take care of itself.”

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