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TOP STORY

Favorite movies of all time: Local leaders discuss why certain films are special to them

By Isabella Kostolni - Freeman Staff
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Whether you watch for the laughs, the action-packed fight scenes, or just the fond memories associated with it, everyone has a favorite movie. And ahead of the 96th Academy Awards happening on Sunday evening, The Freeman took the opportunity to ask some familiar faces in Waukesha County about the films that have a special place in their heart.

Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly

For Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly, his three favorites are all on the more uplifting side. Animated hit “Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs” is one movie he loves as he recalls watching it with his daughters many times. Holiday classic “A Christmas Story” is another, since his father loved watching it during that time of year. Lastly, “Bee Movie” ranks in Reilly’s top three simply because of the film’s “great acting.”

New Berlin Mayor Dave Ament



New Berlin Mayor Dave Ament also enjoys a lighthearted flick, and his three favorites are “The Great Race,” “Blazing Saddles” and “Airplane!” As he explains, when he’s got time away from work, he likes to indulge in “mindless, funny and relaxing entertainment” since “we get enough drama during the rest of our day.”

Waukesha Civic Theatre Executive Director Rhonda Schmidt

Waukesha Civic Theatre Executive Director Rhonda Schmidt likes a slightly more dramatic piece of cinema, and one of her favorites is 1994 movie “Nell” starring Jodie Foster. Schmidt says her performance is “legendary” and that the movie is told “tenderly.” Robin Williams’ performance in “What Dreams May Come” makes the film another one of her favorites, thanks to his “remarkable” acting and the movie’s interesting exploration of the afterlife. Schmidt also says the film “Playing by Heart” is a “storytelling masterpiece” as it portrays the overlapping lives and events of characters portrayed by big names like Angelina Jolie, Sean Connery and Gillian Anderson.

Waukesha School District Superintendent Jim Sebert

Waukesha School District Superintendent Jim Sebert also appreciates the acting prowess of Jodie Foster, but more so in her “dynamic” role as Clarice Starling in “The Silence of the Lambs.” He also notes that Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter really “steals the show” in that crime thriller. The “Rocky” film series (specifically the second, third and fourth movies) are among Sebert’s other favorites, and have been since he was a child, thanks to the “themes of perseverance and overcoming obstacles.” Finally, “The Shawshank Redemption” has earned a spot in the superintendent’s three favorite movies of all time thanks to the “notable” and “unforeseen” relationship that evolves between Andy, played by Tim Robbins, and Red, played by Morgan Freeman. He calls this film “a true classic.”

Waukesha Assistant Fire Chief Joe Hoffman



Waukesha Assistant Fire Chief Joe Hoffman also lists “The Shawshank Redemption” as one of his favorites. He first saw the movie when it was released in theaters in 1994, when Hoffman was in college. Back then, he recalls it always being on television “whenever there was bad weather and you needed a movie on cable to fill a day.” The assistant fire chief says he loves the movie because of its “great storytelling, great actors and great characters.”

“Saving Private Ryan” is another one of his favorites, since he enjoys the message of “mission, team and self,” as well as learning about the stories of World War II.

“The Matrix” also tops the list for Hoffman thanks to Morpheus’ iconic line, which reads “This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill – the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill – you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.” The assistant fire chief says that is a line frequently quoted amongst his friends in public safety.

Lastly, all of John Wayne’s movies are special to Hoffman, since they remind him of his childhood, when his father “would have a rare night that he wasn’t either volunteering at the fire department or doing something with church, he would be relaxing, reading the newspaper, watching a western with a Kingsbury beer in hand, all while listening to me ask ‘Can I change the channel?’” Now, Hoffman says he’s the one watching a John Wayne western while his kids ask to change the channel.

Oconomowoc Public Library Director Jen Puccini

Two of Oconomowoc Public Library Director Jen Puccini’s favorite films were ones she enjoyed during her adolescence.

For Puccini, “The Breakfast Club” took “the difficultness of high school with all the cliques and made a comedy that any teen could relate to in the 80s.” In her later teen years, “Pulp Fiction” became and remains another favorite of hers. “I thought this

movie was straight up crazy, cool and inspirational and still do today,” Puccini said, thanks to the combination of director Quentin Tarantino’s unique style and the exceptional performances from John Travolta, Samuel Jackson, and Uma Thurman.

Lastly, the 2021 release “Belfast” was a movie the library director watched recently, and she thought the chronicles of a working-class Northern Irish family from the perspective of their 9-year-old son was “fabulous.” After watching the film, Puccini says she came away with a “much better understanding of the troubles Northern Ireland has gone through in the past and the effect that it had on their people.”

Waukesha Historian John Schoenknecht

One of local historian John Schoenknecht’s favorite movies, of course, centers around a historical figure. The 1927 French silent film “Napoléon” traces the life of French emperor and military commander Napoleon Bonaparte.

Schoenknecht says the story behind the film’s creation is nearly as interesting as the movie itself. Director Able Gance employed “revolutionary techniques,” the local historian explained, using handheld cameras that captured a snowball fight scene, mounting cameras on horses, and securing one to a pendulum.

Schoenknecht also says that he used a technique called a “triptych,” which utilized three cameras to film a panoramic scene, resulting in an early form of wide-angle film. According to the historian, “Napoléon” was the first of what was planned to be three movies about the French emperor and ran anywhere from four to nine hours long. Schoenknecht also notes that the film premiered right as sound films were released and was soon forgotten. Nonetheless, in the 1950s, an English fan bought a few reels of the film at a flea market and began restoring it. An American version of his film was released in 1980 and more versions of the film have been introduced as pieces have been discovered.



But Schoenknecht's favorite movie of all time is "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial," since "at times humorous and thrilling, it is about how loving someone sometimes means you have to let them go." "Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope" is another one loved by the local historian as he always enjoys "watching this classic story of the small guy versus the evil empire."

Oconomowoc Arts Center Director John Cramer

Oconomowoc Arts Center Director John Cramer participated in a movie club during the COVID-19 pandemic, and watched 101 movies between April 2020 and July 2021. But his three favorites of all time are "The Princess Bride," "It's a Wonderful Life" and "Singin' in the Rain."

Cramer says "The Princess Bride" is one he'll watch over and over again. It's quoted often in his household, and the arts center director notes that he says "have fun stormin' the castle" to his wife every morning.

"It's a Wonderful Life" has been a favorite of Cramer's since he was young, and he notes that James Stewart's "comic timing is impeccable, his despair is palpable, his grace is beautiful." Combined with the "exceptional storytelling" and uplifting message, it's no wonder why Cramer calls it a masterpiece. As a tap dancer himself, "Singin' in the Rain" has a special place in his heart, and he notes that the score is "fantastic" and the film is altogether funny, moving and entertaining thanks to the relationships between characters that are "fully realized and relatable."

Waukesha County Executive Paul Farrow

Waukesha County Executive Paul Farrow also has a soft spot for "Singin' in the Rain," noting that the music and dancing really catch his eye, especially since he claims that he "can't do either of those things." "Patton" is another favorite thanks to the interesting historical perspective and great soundtrack, as well as "Happy Gilmore" because of the "mindless humor" and funny approach to the game of golf.

District 18 Waukesha County Board Supervisor Larry Nelson

As a self-proclaimed movie buff, former Waukesha mayor and current District 18 County Board Supervisor Larry Nelson has seen a variety of films. His third favorite of all time is the 1960 western “The Magnificent Seven.” Nelson says he watched the movie on television many times over as a child and recalls “loving the theme of underdog gunslingers overcoming incredible odds.” The county board supervisor’s second favorite movie is “2001: A Space Odyssey,” which he first saw in 1968 when he was 13 years old, and calls it “visually a mind blowing experience.” For Nelson, the film raises interesting questions about evolution, space travel, the future and AI. It also fueled his love for science fiction novels and turned him into a lifelong fan of director Stanley Kubrick.

But Nelson’s favorite movie of all time is the 1942 classic “Casablanca,” which he first saw while in college. He notes that the “tortured romance between Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, the outsmarting of the Nazis during World War II, the courage to sacrifice for the greater good, the memorable lines, and my favorite movie song ‘As Time Goes By’ all make it worth watching again and again.” After going to Paris with his wife Dawn on their honeymoon, Nelson says he can now say the line “We’ll always have Paris.”

Oconomowoc Mayor Bob Magnus

One of Oconomowoc Mayor Bob Magnus’ favorites is “Star Wars,” noting that as a child he enjoyed “rocketry, the stars and space.” He says that even today, he continues to wonder what is beyond planet Earth. The movie “White Christmas” is at the center of a family tradition for the Magnuses, and they watch it together each holiday season.

The mayor notes that the film “transcends generations.”



Lastly, “The Man from Snowy River” is a favorite thanks to the “exceptional” story and scenery, and how it relates to his passion for horses.

Waukesha Water Utility General Manager Dan Duchniak

For Waukesha Water Utility General Manager Dan Duchniak, there’s a reason why “Top Gun” is his favorite movie ... and it’s not because of the action or the drama.

It’s because Dec. 26, 1986 was his first official date with now-wife Jill. They met at Duchniak’s uncle’s bar on the south side of Milwaukee, where he was bartending. They made a deal that if one of them won a football pool, they would take the other on a date. Duchniak won the pool, and he took Jill to see “Top Gun.” They got married in 1992 and have two sons together, Josh and Justin. When “Top Gun: Maverick” came out in 2022, Duchniak and Jill went to see it in honor of their first date.

Iconic 1993 sports movie “Rudy” is another one of the Waukesha Water Utility general manager’s most loved films thanks to the underdog theme. He says it reminds him of the Waukesha water story, since there “were so many people who opposed and doubted the project would ever be approved or even constructed, but through hard work and determination, the city was successful in achieving our goal.”

The remaining spot in Duchniak’s top three goes to “Major League.” Principally shot in Milwaukee, the 1989 sports comedy provided an opportunity for community members to work as extras. Early in the movie, Duchniak can be spotted as the beer vendor walking up the bleachers in left field where Haywood, played by Pete Vuckovich, hits a home run off of Ricky “Wild Thing” Vaughn, played by Charlie Sheen. As Duchniak explains, the ball wasn’t actually hit over the fence, a crew member threw it into the bleachers from left field.



Duchniak actually got paid to be in the movie and was able to eat lunch with the actors at Milwaukee County Stadium. The movie's stars — Charlie Sheen, Tom Berenger and Corbin Bernsen — were sitting at the table right next to him. They worked the entire day on three scenes, and Duchniak remembers it fondly, noting that “[i]t was an experience I will never forget.”

