

For a decade, his brother has investigated his death in Vietnam for ‘Jimmy in Saigon’

By RICK KOGAN
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Peter McDowell, second from right, with some film-making colleagues in Vietnam. McDowell has spent nearly a decade creating "Jimmy in Saigon," a movie about his older brother Jimmy's life. (Peter McDowell photo)

The scars of the Vietnam War remain. You can see them in the haunted eyes of now aged and homeless veterans, trying to scratch out a living selling Streetwise on street corners, in the broken bodies sitting in VA hospital waiting rooms. They exist in the nightmares of those who came back alive from that once blood-soaked foreign land. They mark the hearts of the friends and family members who endure the loss of someone they once loved.

Peter McDowell is such a person. His eldest sibling Jimmy died in Vietnam on June 6, 1972 . Peter was five years old and living with his parents and four older siblings in downstate Champaign. The family got the news by telegram. Jimmy was 24.

"At five, I knew that something terrible had happened, but I didn't quite understand," McDowell said. "There was chaos in the house. Everyone was weeping."

The tears would dry. Life went on. Peter attended grammar school and high school in Champaign and college at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where he earned a degree in French in 1989 . He then got a MA in Business-Arts Administration from the University of Wisconsin . From 1997 to 2006 he was a program director for Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE), presenting and producing more than 1,000 music, dance, film/video and theater performances.

He then founded Peter McDowell Arts Consulting and worked with artists and arts organizations across the country. He continued with that while also being the director of development for American Friends of the Louvre in Los Angeles, where he now lives.

Amid all this professional activity, he was increasingly drawn to exploring his brother's life. "He had been the lynch pin of our family," he said. "I wanted to try to understand the pall his death had cast over us all."

And so nearly a decade ago he began the journey that has resulted in "Jimmy in Saigon," McDowell's documentary about the brother he had barely known. "I was not so much obsessed with how he had died but rather the effect his death had on our family," he said. "Did we grieve enough? I don't think we did. And there were so many unanswered questions about Jimmy's short life."

Jimmy was drafted into the U.S. Army after dropping out of the University of Chicago . He went to Vietnam , where he was a clerk at the air base at Bien Hoa, located about 16 miles northeast of Saigon .

“He was away from any real battles,” says Peter. “But I know that some of what he saw was terrifying. There was a lot of tragedy there that touched everybody.”

Jimmy returned to Champaign after his tour of duty but within months decided, mystifying and alarming his family and friends, to return to live as a civilian in Vietnam where war still raged.

A year later came the news of his death. Peter was told at the time by his family that “my brother died of some terrible tropical disease” but over the years would come to learn that it and the life his brother led in Vietnam were much more complicated.

The family had kept, and the film features, the nearly 200 letters that Jimmy wrote, mostly to his parents and some to friends. The film also has many family photos and home movies, poignant in capturing moments of childhood innocence. “But his last years were very secretive,” says Peter.



James McDowell served in the U.S. Army in Vietnam in 1971. He is the subject of his brother's movie, "Jimmy in Saigon." (McDowell family photo)

Peter wanted to uncover those secrets and to “put together a mosaic” of his brother’s life. He grew curious if his brother, like so many soldiers, had been using drugs and if that may have contributed to his death. Peter set about trying to meet and interview everyone across the world who had known his brother. This has taken him to Paris and Vietnam, to friends and classmates and, most intimately, to family members.

“My two brothers, two sisters and our mom were all very supportive, at first,” he says. “My mom didn’t quite get the big ambitions I had for this film and once she realized that this might be something that would be seen by a great many people, she became a bit uneasy. But we have talked through it and she has finally come around.”

It is expensive to fly around the globe and to make a movie. McDowell has spent much of his own money to do so and raised more through internet fundraising sites and benefit events, such as the one taking place at 6 p.m. Friday at the Hideout , 1354 W. Wabansia Ave. It will feature a performance by singer/songwriter Nora O’Connor, food and drinks, a silent auction and a talk by McDowell. Attendees will also get a chance to see 14 minutes of the film, a “first look” which has yet to be shown publicly; there are short videos at jimmyinsaigon.com.

I have seen those 14 minutes and can tell you that it will grab you. Handsomely filmed and filled with very forthcoming, honest and emotional interviews, it has the feel of a detective story and provides a fantastic foundation for the feature length finished film.

The movie’s executive producer is native Chicagoan Dan Savage, the syndicated columnist, author and LGBT activist. He and Peter met while in college. “Dan was my first boyfriend and we were partners for five years,” says McDowell. “That was 30 years ago but he has always been fascinated with the story of my brother. So, when I told him I was thinking of making this movie, he was enthusiastic and has been incredibly supportive.”

Savage told his 355,000 Twitter followers that “Jimmy in Saigon” is “a fascinating story and worthy project.” His media expertise and popularity will certainly help give a boost to the film, which McDowell says will be completed early next year, in time for it to be submitted for inclusion in the prestigious Sundance Film Festival and other cinematic showcases.

Though it is an intensely personal journey, “Jimmy in Saigon,” is filled with such universal themes as grief, family secrets, loss, love and war. McDowell says that one of the reasons for making the film was to “finally have peace in the family.” He also says that he was shadowed by a philosophy that his brother expressed in one of his letters home: “One can do a lot of living in a short time. Or of course, just the opposite.”

RICK KOGAN

Born and raised and still living in Chicago, Rick Kogan has worked for the Chicago Daily News, Chicago Sun-Times and the Tribune, where he currently is a columnist. Inducted into the Chicago Journalism Hall of Fame in 2003, he hosts “After Hours with Rick Kogan” on WGN radio and is the author of a dozen books, including “A Chicago Tavern.”