



# YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE

BY LEIGH MACMILLEN HAYES

**A**s a young man, Silas Hagerty left Kezar Falls, Maine, to pursue collegiate degrees and work opportunities, but his ties were never severed. Professionally, he works as a freelance filmmaker, but the roots his parents had planted and the inspiration he received from a generosity-driven organization aimed at living intentionally rather than climbing the corporate ladder encouraged him to give all of his life experiences away at no cost to others in his mid twenties. And so years ago, Silas pared down his belongings to only the essential items that fit into a backpack, along with his camera, and began to seek inspiration from others, while at the same time benefiting from the kindnesses they offered in return.

One of his first experiences occurred while staying with his friend Zack, who had recently become a quadriplegic. “As I filmed Zack struggling to get up with the help of his nurse for the movie ‘Back in Life,’ he was helping take care of my needs,” says Silas. “I slept on the floor of his Skidmore College dorm room and he got food for me from the college dining hall.” It was that sort of situation that became his lifestyle.

Years later, as he finished work on another film called “Dakota 38” about indigenous people who retraced a 330-mile route from South Dakota to Minnesota to arrive at the hanging site of the largest mass execution in United States history, Silas realized he

wanted to show a rough cut version in his hometown. The problem—finding a venue in Kezar Falls.

His dad suggested the old movie theater. “What movie theater?” Silas recalls asking.

That’s when his father told him that the former Welch’s Discount Store warehouse on Main Street had once been the Playhouse Theater. The theater closed in 1971 and since Silas was born a decade later, it was never a part of his childhood memory.

Learning a bit of the building’s history caused the proverbial light bulb to shimmer brightly. “I am a filmmaker. I love theater. Is there any chance I can learn more about this place?”

While visiting his parents, he called upon Phil Welch, who had operated the theater in the 1960s and ‘70s.

“He told me great stories including being in the hot projectionist room upstairs and beaming a flashlight down on young lovers,” says Silas.

For several hours the two men talked but when Silas finally got around to asking about the future of the building, he could tell that Phil was still too emotionally attached to it. After all, it had also served as the warehouse for the discount store he’d created and filled with items he thought the locals could afford to purchase. You see, Phil was a community-oriented man.

“I’ll never sell,” Phil said as he leaned

toward Silas. “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you wait until I die. My kids will sell it to you for a lot cheaper.” The two men grinned, shook hands, and Silas departed.

A couple of years later, he learned that Phil had passed away and so after a few months he reached out to Dianne Welch Wentworth, one of the daughters. She chuckled when Silas relayed his meeting with Phil to her. “That sounds like my dad.”

Silas explained his idea of trying to bring the theater back to life and showed her a few of his film productions. Dianne was generous and sold him the building at a price he could afford. He remembers her saying, “We’re honored to give you a good deal as we know it’s going to take a lot to fix it up.”

As it turns out, he learned that the building had been constructed about 1884 by Dr. Edwin Chellis and was called Meionaon Hall. The floor was a roller skating rink as still evidenced by its circular pattern. The stage was added in the 1920s and events from boxing tournaments to talent shows, basketball games, and high school graduations were held there. It was also the site of Town Meeting.

Many people, including community service volunteers from his alma mater, Sacopee Valley High, have helped refurbish the building bit by bit. And through it all, Phil’s presence is felt for it seems that quite often as Silas realizes he needs a particular

tool, he finds it right around the corner.

“Early on,” says Silas, “people would come in and ask, ‘What are you going to do here?’ and I’d reply, ‘I don’t know. What do you think?’ The space has allowed people to dream, to be empowered.” Phil would be pleased to know that the theater has been recreated by so many local people who have donated time and monies.

Silas credits his wife and her awesome chili as the driving force behind building parties. All who help are fed and it has taken many hands to put up the siding, sand the floors, and paint inside and out. Not only is the food great, but a sense of ownership and camaraderie has developed.

The 185 seats were each lovingly reupholstered by Silas. Intermixed in three rows are couches. Myrtle, acquired from an estate in Massachusetts, sits in the back looking regal with gold trim. In the middle, is the velvet covered Rosy, which he found at an antique store in Rhode Island. “I fell in love with her, but didn’t buy her right away and I regretted it. Then three months later the price had dropped and I knew we were meant to have each other.” Sherman, situated in the front row, was so named because Silas found him sitting on Sherman Street in Portland. You have to arrive early for an event if you want to sit on a couch. They are the first seats to go. Perhaps Silas’ proudest feature, however, is the six-foot chandelier that hangs from the center of the theater. “It was my first baby,” he admits. “I got carried away with it.”

So here’s the thing about Kezar Falls Theater. Every event is free: Popcorn.

Soft drinks. And even hugs. It all goes back to the model Silas has long embraced—if you take care of other people, they will take care of you.

“It’s important that all enjoy the show and it creates such a powerful energy. People want to help in return,” says Silas. “They may throw in some money, but if they can’t, we still want them to enjoy the venue. At the last variety show, we had to turn away people.”

All of this has led to two meaningful projects under the umbrella Smooth Feather Youth. The first came from Silas’ work on a film project at San Quentin Prison in California. “A lot of inmates told me about their lives,” he says. “At a certain age they were at a crossroads and they took a left turn instead of a right and ended up in jail. It inspired me to think about youth at a crossroads and how I could help them.”

He’d worked with youth previously as a ski and soccer coach, but this time he decided to create something more fitting for the space—a film school. Each summer, he and six others in the film industry work in a 1-to-1 ratio with seven kids for five days.

The kids are given a plot and tasked with



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creating a scene using improv techniques. While some of them act, others learn hands-on about sound, running a camera and all the finer points of filming with the pros watching over their shoulders and teaching as they go. In about two and a half days, the kids rehearse their scenes, learn stunts, and practice filming. The same amount of time goes into editing the production.

At the end of the six days, the red carpet is laid out and the kids are treated as movie stars and producers as they enter the theater for the premiere showing of their films. “One thing I love about the red carpet is that we have a receiving line. All the students welcome the community into the space. The kids also help serve popcorn and act as ushers.” In fact, says Silas, “They act as if they own the place.”

After the premiere of last summer’s film, “A Chance to Stand,” Silas secretly submitted it to the Boston International Kids Film Festival. He didn’t want the kids to be disappointed if it wasn’t accepted. But, it was chosen as one of fifty films to be featured so in November he rented a big van and took them to Somerville, Massachusetts. Despite the fact that their film didn’t win, they had fun. Three days later Silas received an e-mail from the festival director. “A Chance to Stand” had won the Audience Choice Award. “A film made in a week in little old Kezar Falls,” says Silas. “The heart of the community was felt in the film and it touched the people in Boston.”

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Smooth Feather Youth also offers Men's and Women's Excursion programs, outdoor programs for middle and high school kids. Yes, you read that correctly, "Men's and Women's," because Silas has learned the value of treating them like young adults and expecting a lot from them. His philosophy is that if you ask deep questions, they'll respond with deep answers.

Each five-week session begins with a weekly check-in, during which the groups talk about life and struggles and offer each other support. It's a time to think about how one reacted to a situation and what he/she might do to make it right the next time. The kids consider options and how the other person in a given situation might feel.

And then they head outdoors where they ride mountain bikes, hike, practice survival skills, canoe, etc. The session ends with a day or overnight weekend excursion. "Last year, we hosted an overnight camping trip and hike up Mount Chocorua in New Hampshire. They were sure they couldn't make it to the top," says Silas. But they did.

As Silas and I sit in the lobby and talk, we hear quick footsteps on the sidewalk. In a minute, the door flies open and two grinning young men enter the room, Jacob and Kayne. Silas invites them to sit on the couch beside me.

Jacob clasps his hands in his lap and focuses on something straight ahead. I ask him how joining the Excursions Group has helped him. He replies, "By getting outside more and doing tons of fun stuff." Silas' question is more direct: "Has it helped with family stuff?"

Rocking back and forth a bit as he continues to stare into space, Jacob articulately responds, "Yeah, a lot. My mom had two aneurisms. One exploded at nine o'clock; the other at 9:30 as they were putting her on the stretcher. My birthday is the 23rd of February. This happened the next Monday.

She died March 2. From the moment I joined the group, it's helped me. I don't even think about it when I'm here."

For kids like Jacob, Excursions is a place to listen and be heard, and gain living skills that are helping him at such a fragile time. I sit in awe of his poise as he shares his story, but I've a strong inclination that his ability to do so is in part because of the opportunity he's had to participate in the group since a week after his mother died this spring.

Jacob's buddy, Kayne, is equally articulate and explains to me that the two of them had gotten into a fight in the not too distant past, but that he was grateful the group had brought them together again. Kayne talks about his anger issues. "Silas helps me," says Kayne. "I don't get in trouble as often as I used to. When we're here our phones are powered down. It's fun to put it down and go do something successful."

For Jacob, the group is important because it's helped him "get my head out of the clouds and be in the sunshine." Kayne adds, "I'm better at controlling my anger. I try to block other people out who are starting stuff."

To sustain the groups, Silas has written grants, but he also appreciates that the townspeople have embraced the programs and events by helping to fund items such as mountain bikes and food for the excursions. Recently he launched a Patrons program. For \$5/month, you receive a Smooth Feather Youth T-shirt with Patron printed on the sleeve. Silas finds that this makes people feel an integral part of the programs. All of the monies raised go directly to the film school, excursions and many events held at the theater throughout the year.

In the end, the most important thing is that the theater and Smooth Feather Youth are all about love and support and structure. And especially community. Because like Phil, Silas is also community oriented. "In little old Kezar Falls." 🌟

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