

The Last Guide wins People's Choice Award



By **Mike Riley**

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Cristian Gomes' film *The Last Guide* about the last fishing guide in Algonquin Park Frank Kuiack, has won the 2023 Aqua Bound People's Choice Award at the Paddling Film Festival. Gomes, Amy Stenner, film festival sales and marketing specialist with Rapid Media, Helen McConnell, marketing and communications specialist with Algonquin Park-Ontario Parks with the Ministry of the Environment Conservation and Parks and Kuiack's niece Sharleen LaValley comment to Bancroft This Week about this recent honour. Kuiack passed away in 2021, but his legacy as a fishing guide for over seven decades and the last fishing guide in Algonquin Park lives on. At one time there were over 140 fishing guides in the park, but by the turn of this century, Kuiack was the last one. Raised on a farm outside of Whitney on Long Lake, which is now called Galeairy Lake, Kuiack was one of 16 children. He began guiding in the park at the age of eight years when he showed a group of travellers from Ohio where to catch the best small mouth bass on Galeairy Lake. That piqued his interest in guiding and he never stopped. Over the years as a guide, Kuiack gained extensive knowledge about fish populations in the lakes within Algonquin Park and helped park staff put in place conservation measures for those fish populations, according to the Friends of Algonquin Park. For more information on Kuiack, see the May 12, 2021 Bancroft This Week article "Frank Kuiack: The Stuff Legends are Made Of." This is the 18th year the Paddling Film Festival has chosen a winner for their favourite film from the world tour, and Gomes' film *The Last Guide* captured the 2023 Aqua Bound People's Choice Award. Stenner says that they were really happy that *The Last Guide* won the People's Choice Award, as it hadn't won any category award with them. "So, it's kind of nice that it went to someone who hadn't already been accoladed. The other really nice thing about that film is that it speaks of Algonquin Park. So many of the paddlers who watched that film will have paddled in Algonquin and it obviously resonated to the heart of the audience that watches the Paddling Film Festival. So, I think the fact that the documentary was based in Algonquin Park and about such an iconic character was why it did so well," she says. Stenner says that Gomes took home a \$500 cash prize from Aqua Bound for his win. She further adds that the 2024 Paddling Film Festival just kicked off in Toronto, with 29 films shortlisted. For more details, go to www.paddlingfilmfestival.com. Directed by Gomes, it was produced by Aidan Cheeatow and Kerim Banka. Toronto-based Gomes is an emerging documentary producer, director and cinematographer, whose work has been seen at film festivals internationally. *The Last Guide* is his first feature length documentary film and his work

focuses often on exploring identity, politics and economics in North America. He has worked with global distributors and producers including the CBC and Little Dot Studios. Gomes told Bancroft This Week on Feb. 3 that it feels great to win this award and that it's a recognition for the crew of years of hard work and passion that went into this film. "It wasn't always easy. One of the biggest challenges was filming Frank during the pandemic of course. We had to take a lot of precautions as his health was failing, but we wanted to make sure we documented his story with the respect and totality it deserves. When he passed due to cancer, it was really hard on his family and of course, losing our main subject was unexpected and heartbreaking. We had to pivot our film to instead speak about his legacy and the impact he had on [Algonquin] Park," he says. Gomes says the best part about making the film was being able to get a peek into Kuiack's life and mind and just to be around him. He said he was a truly captivating, trusting, and loving person who reminded everyone of their grandpa. Gomes said that Kuiack would invite everyone in the crew to stay at his home instead of paying for accommodations, and they would spend many nights chatting over instant coffee and crosswords. "One of the reasons I was inspired to make this film was Frank's innate calling to serve people and how he folded the call of nature into that. It gave him a firm sense of identity and purpose. Those are qualities that aren't easy to come by, and I think his story serves as a powerful example of how fulfilling life can be when you are sure of your purpose. I believe that resonates with audiences the most," he says. Gomes said they wanted to thank the various communities around Algonquin Park, from the Township of Algonquin Highlands to South Algonquin Township. He says they had amazing people from all over the park contributing to the film and welcome them into their communities to help them tell the story of a local legend. And he also wanted to share his win with everyone who watched, supported and voted for the film, acknowledging that without them it would not have been possible. "We know from all the lovely comments and emails that the community appreciates the film and we are so proud that they feel it's a great representation of Frank and his legacy. We often hear from Frank's family, who express their gratitude and are very excited to see how much exposure the film is getting. The film embodies Frank's bold spirit and serves as a way for the family to keep a piece of that spirit forever. I think in the end, that is what we're most proud of," he says. Gomes invites everyone to follow his team's journey and see their next great Canadian film by following them on Instagram at @lostlinemedia or by joining their mailing list at contact@lostline.ca. McConnell shared the following comment from Algonquin Park on The Last Guide's win. "It is great to see Frank Kuiack's unique Algonquin Provincial Park story being shared with the paddling community and seeing all those involved in the film recognized for their hard work," she says. LaValley told Bancroft This Week that she thought the news of The Last Guide winning the 2023 Aqua Bound People's Choice Award was fantastic. "[My uncle] would have loved that!?"