Interview with Raven Award Winner, Film Director Andrew Ahn

Pastor Adam: Okay, hi, everyone, and welcome to this special interview with Andrew Ahn, who is the 2020 recipient of the Raven Award. The Raven Award is an award that we've been giving since 2012, it's the Raven Award for Arts, Excellence, and Entertainment and it's given to an Artist whose work exemplifies the extraordinary capacity of the arts and entertainment to soften hearts and shifts our thinking about ourselves, our relationships and the things that make for peace. And it's hard to think of someone who exemplifies that in arts and entertainment more than director Andrew Ahn. Andrew has directed multiple movies, his latest one for which we so wanted to give Andrew this award for because it's everything that this Award is about, is a movie called *Driveways*. Previously, Andrew directed *Spa Nights* and so, we encourage you to go check that out too. But, *Driveways* is the big movie that we're going to talk about today. And so, Andrew, thank you so much for being here, it's a privilege and honor to talk with you today.

Andrew Ahn: Yeah, man, thank you so much for having me and I'm so, thrilled to be the recipient of this award and very happy to be chatting with you all tonight.

Pastor Adam: It's fantastic and I've seen the movie twice, I was reading… I think it was Roger Ebert's review of the movie. No, who is it now, I'm sorry?

Andrew Ahn: I think, it's Roger Ebert.

Pastor Adam: It's Roger Ebert, I'm thinking …

Andrew Ahn: It's hard to say.

Pastor Adam: Yeah, so I was reading that review and he wrote and said, "I watched it and I immediately went and watched it again. It's just a beautiful movie about relationships and community." So, it's just great to be able to talk with you. We've got some people in the audience, people are trickling in and so, if you have any comments or questions for Andrew as we continue in this conversation, please feel free to put those in the comment section and we'll bring those in.

So, I guess my first question that might open up, for us is… I'm not exactly sure how it works, but I imagine that as a director you get screenplays from folks, and you get to pick what you think will be a good movie or a good movie to direct for you? Is that how it goes?

Andrew Ahn: Yeah, so, there are kind of various different ways that a director discovers material to work on. With my first feature, *Spa Night*, that was something that I had written myself, with *Driveways* that was a Screenplay, written by Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen and that was sent to me by our producer, Joe Pirro. And, when I was reading screenplays in this moment in my life after having made my first feature, I'm looking to figure out what I wanted to do for my second feature. I was reading a lot of stuff that just didn't resonate with me, screenplays that had similar themes, that I explored in my first film, like coming of age, but, I think it's a really difficult thing to capture humanity which was what I was looking for and which is what Hannah and Paul did so beautifully for *Driveways*. Something that I'm interested in, in my storytelling is to discover narratives where the drama isn't being caused by a villain, but that the drama is caused by people who love each other too much.

The reason why there is conflict in this film is not because of hatred, but, because of love, and that for me makes it a lot more heartbreaking and difficult to understand. And that was what was

so compelling about *Driveways* for me. There wasn't necessarily a simple bad person, even if, the nosy, neighbor, Linda, is like a little frustrated, like she is not a villain, really works hard. The tension in the film is that Del and Cody have created this really beautiful bond, this friendship that may not, get to continue. And that for me just feels like real life. And so, I felt so strongly about wanting to be a part of this story. I pitched to the producers, really let them know, my personal connection to the material, how I felt like I can bring my perspective to the film, and I was very fortunate that they chose me.

Pastor Adam: Is it more difficult to do a film that way? I mean, I would imagine, that one of the basic ways to do a film, the easiest way might be to have the villain, have the scapegoat in the movie and that's almost might be the goal, too, for movies. Is it harder to do it the way you did it or...?

Andrew Ahn: I think there is a different kind of challenge in me making a film that has a narrative, kind of built on that foundation, I think a narrative that is more kind of good and evil like focused… There is a simplicity to it and I think that there are films that I like, wonderful and super entertaining and interesting, but, I think for me, it's harder for me to see those in my life and like I should be hard-pressed to say who is like a personal villain of mine. I think there might be villainous ideologies, maybe. I'm not sure, but, I think for me, I think that with film making, with telling stories at this scale, knowing that this film will be distributed in theaters and, streaming platforms, on airplanes, that I wanted to say, like meditate on kindness and love. That's a really undervalued, under-examined aspect of our humanity.

Pastor Adam: Yeah, we've got some folks watching and if you have comments or questions, you can feel free to put those in the chat section. Tim says, "No villainous people, only villainous ideologies." Beautiful. I guess maybe the closest thing to a villain are those boys, the neighbors' grandchildren, they play an interesting role in it as well, but before we get to them, the story is about a young Asian-American boy primarily. And he does an amazing job in this film and his relationship with Del, and his relationship with his mom, there is a lot of loss in this story, and that's also part of the humanity of it, is how do these people go through loss. So, Cody's mom, Kathy, this all comes about because her sister has died and she was a hoarder and she's having to go from Michigan to New York, is that right?

Andrew Ahn: Yeah.

Pastor Adam: And deal with her house and get rid of all the stuff she had accumulated over the years. She is dealing with the loss of her sister and that she was never close to anyway. Can you talk a little bit about loss in this movie and that aspect of it?

Andrew Ahn: It's I think what really grounds the film in like a shared experience that Kathy and Cody have lost this relative, Kathy's sister. That Del, who lives next door, that he's lost his wife, Vera. There is something about the shared experience of grieving that everybody is going through, but it was really important to Hannah and Paul and to myself that the film not necessarily dwells on the trauma, but really emphasizes on the journey of healing. I think there are other versions of *Driveways* as a narrative where you see people have a heart attack or you know, you see Del move away like to be explicit about the trauma. For me, I think trauma is a very, kind of risky thing to put in your films, to put in stories, because it can trigger people, and I think there are certain stories, certain goals, with your act that may require you to have to go into an explicit representation of trauma. For me, this wasn't this movie.

Again, I really wanted to focus on the healing process because I think that gives people a sense of hope and perspective for their own lives. There was a certain timeliness to when *Driveways* came out. It was released during the pandemic and I feel like the fact that we had that message of hope and connection really resonated with people when we were in the middle of something that was so difficult and just so hard. So, I think it's, for me, just something that it's a part of our journey as human beings on this earth, this question of loss and having to understand that someone might not be there anymore and it's something that I really wanted to explore and as human and in an honest way as possible.

Pastor Adam: Healing is as you say in the midst of pandemic and as we were coming out of the pandemic, there has been a lot of harm, a lot of hurt, a lot of social isolation which is being traumatic in itself. What in the movie, what might be some steps in the movie, I guess, that people take that we could learn from as we seek to heal from this pandemic?

Andrew Ahn: Yeah, it's interesting to think about *Driveways* as like a parable of sorts, it's something that I didn't necessarily intend but, I think can be interpreted and be used that way. For me, there's something about, like an invitation, it's a very kind of cute moment in the story, but, I actually think it's so important and meaningful that Cody invites Del to his birthday party at the roller-skating rink and he draws this invite and slips it into Del's newspaper and Del sees it in his newspaper while eating his oatmeal. And it's a very cute invite. We actually had the actor who plays Cody, Lucas Jaye, draw that invite. And if you look closely, it's a pizza slice on roller skates, which is stinking cute.

There's is something about the invitation that I think it's really important, in building bridges, and building solid connections between individuals, between communities. This was something that, this past year, between like black communities organizers and Asian-American community organizers, understanding that there is a common enemy in white supremacy and understanding that together we can do more as allies for each other. I think there is a necessity to cross those boundaries that society has imposed on us. So whether it's racial lines, generational lines, the physical boundary of a driveway that building a relationship is, I think, so keying in helping us not just live as individuals but live as a community, as the society that feels so mutually helpful to each other.

Pastor Adam: There is a beautiful scene in that elongated when Del is supposed to get a ride to the VFW and before this, there is like a little bit of tension between Del and Kathy because Del is talking to Cody and she's like don't talk to my son, you're a stranger, stuff like that, but, then, she offers to take him to the VFW and she opens up to him, in this very vulnerable kind of moment about how her sister is dead and there's no electricity there. And they go to the VFW and he's back home and like the next day, he's got this power cord going over to her house, with all these power strips connected with it. Is this kind of crossing the driveway, crossing the divide, a beautiful moment in the film?

Andrew Ahn: Yeah, there's something about, sometimes when we're kind to each other, we're still kind of unsure how... [laughter]. I think there's something really, there is a hesitation, I understand that it is difficult to kind of bridge those divides and sometimes, you can't do it, face to face, sometimes, you have to do it like Del does, just kind of early in the morning, stringing extension cords across a driveway. Then with Kathy, you know, kind of having to trust her son's judgment of Del and be like, "Okay, if you want me to take him to the VFW, I think we can." And so, I think it's not an easy thing. I think this is something that I've witnessed a lot, I think there's

so much frustration, like society isn't moving forward faster and I share that frustration like I agree in reaching equity-like, it seems like such a slow, scary process. And I think we've got to acknowledge that it's because it's so difficult. It's the really difficult task and that's not meant to demoralize anybody, I think it's actually meant for us to take the world seriously.

I think if we said like, “This is so easy, why aren’t you doing it this way, why don't you understand this?” And it's like because it's not easy, we have to put in the work. So, it's a really tricky thing, but, I wanted to acknowledge that in some way, in *Driveways*, that this isn't effortless, it's actually quite effortful. That’s what makes it meaningful.

Pastor Adam: That scene is a good example, because Del is trying to help Cody, he's trying to get the water to work outside the house, and he is like the other way, and then, they have this conversation and he gets wet, and his mom, Kathy comes over and gets upset with Del. And he’s like, "screw you, lady, I’m trying to help your son.” And his response is short with her, and stuff and they get over that first impressions, I’m saying, they get over their hostilities towards their each other, I guess, and it's a good way to model that in the film?

Andrew Ahn: Definitely, I think that's there is this a real just kind of in that moment, something that we can extrapolate, suggest, kind of how we interact with each other, how we try and help each other out in the real world

Pastor Adam: Tim says, “Progress is not an easy task, it takes effort and it's worth it.” Peter says, “Effortful on a very personal basis beyond groups and identities that divide.” Absolutely. Maura says, “The point of moving forward is well represented in Del’s regret about how he treated his daughter.” Yeah, can you say a little bit about that?

Andrew Ahn: Definitely, you know, not to spoil it for anybody who hasn’t seen the film, but, the final few minutes of the movie are really dedicated to this monologue that Del gave, played by, the late Brian Dennehy. He really kind of opens his heart to the world and tells his story to Cody, and part of that is regret. And regret is a really scary thing for me to think about and I have a very real fear of death and dying, and I think it's because there is something about the film, make it a part of me where I’m imagining things a lot. I read screenplays and I have to imagine that reality. And it’s very easy for me to do that, so in the screenplay for *Driveways*, we saw the houses that we're going to shoot at and I can imagine, all these are the scenes that are going to happen here and there's something about death like I can't imagine it. There is nothing I can do to help me imagine what that reality is. And so, I’ve come to a certain sense of peace, just thinking that by the time I die, hopefully, I have come to peace with it and I have lived a life that I’m very proud of. The thing that complicates that potential solution is regret and so Del, really, expressing his regret over, how he treated his daughter not necessarily being so supportive of her living in the small town. That for me it's a true sadness and one that can't be erased, maybe not even forgiven. It's really not up to the audience for us to forgive Del for anything. It's only Del’s daughter’s choice. So, for me, I think that we might not be able to forgive Del, but we might be able to give him a sense of hope in the kindness that he showed Cody in the film. And the lessons that he can share with Cody. And I think for me, that's as much as we can do, where, if we've done something wrong in our lives, we may not necessarily be able to fix it, but, what can you do, from that point on, is be productive and generous. It's a really, kind of messy, hard, difficult part of the movie but, I really feel like, regret is something that we may not be able to erase but we can find grace to deal with.

Pastor Adam: Well, it's a great part of the movie, because it's so human. We can all identify with it and on one level like you say, there is no villain in this story, on one level, I'm listening and I'm like, that's me. You're working really hard to try to provide for your family, and that takes you away from your family and his regret also for taking his wife away like across the country and also now, he is having to deal with the regret of leaving this boy, that's he's been a father figure to for months, but they are doing it. That was one of the things that was, really impactful for me, it was Cody's dad is not in the picture and so he's missing a father figure, and Del is able to step into that role for a short period of time.

Andrew Ahn: I think for myself as a gay person, I think a lot about the idea of chosen family. I've been very fortunate that I have a very strong knit family and that is supportive but, I know other people in the LGBTQ community where their families have abandoned them, do not approve of who they are, and so, you've to find other people in your life and I think, it goes beyond just friends. I think it's really this idea of chosen family and that's so important, I think there's this element to *Driveways* where I think Del and Cody have chosen to be family together, and I think that's so beautiful. I don't necessarily think that biology is the only and most important factor in what links people together, I think it can be shared values, I think it can be sensibility, I think it can be shared time and space, like Del and Cody for the summer, and I think that can it's just as valuable and can be just as nurturing to people.

Pastor Adam: Before we started, we had a brief conversation with Maura about this and Maura brought up the man in the film, the older men, war veterans of the Korean war. That is an interesting dynamics in the movie, in that way, but, what do you make of that in the film?
screenplay has personal elements drawn from Hannah and Paul's life. Hannah, her mom owns an antique shop and would take Hannah to these state sales where people have been hoarders, they will go through the things, of people who have passed. Paul's dad is a Korean war vet, Paul has a nephew, and just seeing that interaction between this child and this older man, I think that dynamic is part of the movie, the friendship between Del and Cody. So because, Paul's dad is a Korean war veteran, that was kind of there from the beginning. I came in as the director, and then made the choice to cast Asian American actors for Kathy and Cody and so suddenly, there is a little bit of dynamic going on that's a wrinkle, a shade to the story, that wasn't necessarily there beforehand. I wanted to make Kathy and Cody, Asian-Americans because, it's a little selfish but, as an Asian-American, I really wanted to tell more Asian American stories and I wanted to work with Asian American actors. And I saw how Kathy and Cody feel like outsiders in this town. And so to externalize that, in their ethnicity, it felt like something interesting to try and I thought about that idea for a while and I felt like it was something that could really work and add an interesting nuance to the story.

I ultimately wanted to be careful of tying too direct a comparison or relationship between Del being a Korean war veteran and Kathy and Cody, being Asian-American. Because I didn't want Del's kindness to seem like he was trying to make up for something that he had done, because I felt that would be reductive and kind of ignoring Kathy's and Cody's individuality. And so, I was very careful not to explicitly go there. I didn't want to have to ever say, "Hey, am being nice to you because I have regrets about what I did during the Korean War." Because it will just be... Again, defending what I said earlier, I don't think it's like my place to forgive someone in that instance. And so, I think there's a lived experience of being a war veteran that really colors how Del sees the world and how he's grown and how he's aged from that point. And then I think, it's this thing where he ultimately helps Kathy and Cody and befriends Cody because of a true kind of humanity and that for me, it's always had to be, the first reason.

Pastor Adam: The humanity of it. The empathizing that Del does, I can't recall in one of these situations where he does talk about his Korean War experience is after, I mentioned earlier, that Cody has this moment where he throws up in this very intense situation with a couple of other boys, and, this beautiful moment where Del says, his wife thrown up too when I was, and I was working the trains, and I had to deal with the throw-up of everybody?

Andrew Ahn: It's one of my favorite scenes, I love how wholesome it is for a scene where throw-up is mentioned so many times. I think exactly the case like there's something about like a shared experience about throwing up. These two people can connect about and the story that Del tells, isn't necessarily like a political story, it's a very small human experience that he had and I think something that he knew that could help Cody feel safer. That scene is so interesting, as soon as you see them eating their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, you know that they're going to be fast friends and it's really fun sequence for me. I really love also after that when they read *National Geographic* together. I think it really shows how quickly two people can find common ground.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's awesome. We're about coming to the end, so if you have any comments or questions, you want to throw in there, feel free to do that. I wanted to ask a little bit about behind-the-scenes. Any stories within the actors, producers, you, the director, this was Brian Dennehy's, his last film. Any experiences with him?

Andrew Ahn: Yeah. Brian was just such a generous spirit on set. He was 79 years old. It was really hot and humid, we were shooting up in the Hudson Valley in New York and I was just like suffering from the heat, he wanted to be there but not only did he, show up to set, he readily poured himself into the process. There is a scene where Del has to tell Cody that he's moving to Seattle at the end of the summer and we filmed Brian's part of the scene first, and then we filmed Lucas' side of the scene next. And the scene was really beautiful, I was happy we're going to move on and Brian came up to me, he said, "Hey, Lucas was so good, he was just really inspiring, I have some ideas that I would love to film some of my shots again." To hear that Brian was… like so humble that he would admit that he was inspired by his 11-year-old, co-star and that he didn't just want to go back to this air-conditioned room, where can relax and show up, he wanted to work. It was just so, inspiring and so generous of him.

I've said it before, I hope that I'm that motivated and that passionate about what I'm doing when I hit his age. There is something about the overall spirit of making *Driveways*, but we wanted to, kind of mirror the kindness of the story like in our approach to making it, and I think it's something that I want to carry through with future productions, because, I think, there is something about that generosity that I think it just allows us to do the best work. And, I can give another example, another kind of fun behind the scenes, story where Lucas, the actor, who plays Cody, we didn't want him to memorize the whole script. In working with him, I could observe that his performance always felt that extra little bit of pressure or nuance, he did over-prepare, which is something I think a lot of young actors do because they are so nervous, they like memorize the lines, over and over again. And, I just wanted Lucas to feel comfortable on set, that he could make a mistake, and that could be fine.

So, actually, for almost every scene of the movie, Lucas only got the script for that scene an hour before, 30 minutes before, he would look at it, he show up the set, and he'd be great. Hong, the actress who plays Kathy, his mom, she saw what was happening there with Lucas,

and kind of a show of solidarity, like she kind of started to do that too, she didn't want to over-prepared and she wanted to keep that factual nuance. So, she would mess up her lines, but that's okay, we were filming, we can film it again. It created this atmosphere where everybody felt like "Oh, we're on the same page." So there is something about the process of just being present and understanding how other people are working, adjusting and adapting, and again being generous with each other. I think it allows for this kind of special quality in the film, to feel like it has like a real heart to it. I think that was the best thing about the making of *Driveways* was that it was, such a generous process. For me, I think that the making of the film was as meaningful to me as the film project.

Pastor Adam: Peter says, “Perhaps, on the spot kindness can be contagious.”

Andrew Ahn: I think that's a great way to put it.

Pastor Adam: Tim says, “I was working on a sermon and asking is God a master of love, or a director who guides gently. A dictator who enforces his very detail.”

Andrew Ahn: It's an interesting question, and I’ll say that filmmakers, they are like very different styles of directing and some of them are very exacting and want something very precisely what they imagine in their mind, and there are other filmmakers who really love the kind of exploration and allowing actors to discover things, I think it's a question that can be asked of many different disciplines and situations.

I see, there is a question about Christina Ebersole and very quickly say, such a delight to work with. One of my favorite movies is *Amadeus*, Christina had such a fun, you know, memorable role in that movie, and my favorite story about Christine, is that in her makeup, she would dial home, and *Facetime* with her birds. So, she would sing to her birds, and her birds will sing back to her and it was just like the most beautiful kind of enduring thing, you know just like the love of your pets, your animals. Christine definitely loved her birds.

Pastor Adam: That’s amazing. Lindsey says, "Everyone came across genuinely and naturally, all of the emotions felt real, the growth of friendship and transition from stranger-ness to trust, all felt so natural and real." I wanted to ask you, like you talked about Brian Dennehy, and how you wanted to be like him and this gets Peter's comments, perhaps on the spot of, "Kindness can be contagious.” and I think that really works. One of my take on away from *Driveways* was, especially as I was watching it, watching this 80+ year-old man, as they are navigating the relationship with one another and going through early phases of maybe dementia or Alzheimer’s or something and how they are so gentle with one another, I was like, if I make it to 80 I want to be like these guys in this movie.

Andrew Ahn: Yeah, I had a lot of fun with those guys, Jerry Adler, who plays Roger, who is Del’s friend, I think I actually, when we were filming, he was 89, his like nearing 90, and memorize those words, for the poem that he recites for the VFW, I think for me, that element of the story that Hannah and Paul crafted for the VFW, I think, it's really about finding community, you have a place to where you can go, where you have people to be responsible for, that you care about, that you're invested in their lives, and so, whether it's VFW, or roller rink, or any other space there, there is something about gathering spaces that I think are so important. Because, especially, I think, as people get older, there is the danger of isolation, of being. isolated. So, I think, again, kind of take it full circle like it is this question of the invite, as a part of

our lives, how can we reach out, how can we invite each other to kind of pull ourselves out from what can often be a very scary lonely existence.

Pastor Adam: Lindsey, says, “I love the inclusion of the excerpts from Thanatopsis. It reminded me of one I memorized in 11th grade.” I loved that too, it really touched my heart to think of the veteran and having memorized it as a boy, and remembering it as an old man. Especially, my grandfather when he was... He lived to be 102, and he had Alzheimer’s, and forgot almost everything, except for... He was a Lutheran pastor, except for the Lord’s Prayer, and he would just like repeat it, he was mostly Norwegian. It was one thing he could always go back to and so I was reminded of my 102-year-old granddad when he was doing the *Thanatopsis*. Am I saying that right?

Andrew Ahn: Yeah, it is, I think so, *Thanatopsis*, that moment in the screenplays, is actually another moment drawn from our writer's lives, it was something that actually happened to Paul. An older relative of his just suddenly remembered this poem and there was just a silence afterward, where they all knew they were witnessing something so beautiful, but also something that felt really tragic. And so, I remember when I first met Hannah and Paul in person, they told me that this was their favorite thing they ever written together, and also, the most personal thing. And that they’re both excited and also terrified, because I really wanted to do it justice. But, I think, it just goes to show you, sometimes, when we're vulnerable as artist, when we reveal parts of ourselves, when we use parts of ourselves in our art that there is an insight, and with that insight comes meaning, and that's what makes the experience of watching a film and experiencing arts so powerful.

Pastor Adam: Well, I’m no film critic, but I would say that you did it justice. I loved the movie and we're getting claps from our audience. So Andrew, thank you so much for being here. Thank you for making this movie and can you tell us anything about what you have coming up in the future?

Andrew Ahn: Yeah, I’m developing more films, I want to keep making work. I’m shooting a movie later this year. It's a little bit lighter in tone, but, something that celebrates, what I said before, chosen family. And so, I think after going through this pandemic wanting to do something that celebrates chosen family and community just felt like the right thing and exciting thing to do. Yeah, I hope to keep making work and being able to have conversations about it like this.

Pastor Adam: I want to get Jessica’s final comments and here it is, "I love the final scenes, where the kids were playing outside, on a summer evening. It made me happy that Cody had made friends. Love the movie and thank you for your time.”

Andrew Ahn: Thank you so much for inviting me, and thank you again for the award, it's a real honor and yeah, I just really enjoyed our conversation this evening.

Pastor Adam: I’d say it was... I enjoyed it too. It was a pleasure talking with you, and thank you, everyone, for being here and just thank you. Awesome.

Andrew Ahn: Thank you all.