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Written by Mark Griffin

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Not many people outside of Gibsonburg are familiar with the name Andy Gruner.

Gruner, a 2005 graduate of Gibsonburg High School, just graduated from the University of Cincinnati and is moving to Dayton to become a pharmacist with Walgreens.

Asked which actor he would choose to portray himself in a movie, Gruner said, "I'm not that into movies. I have no clue. I wouldn't even know who to start with."

In 2005, Gruner was the starting pitcher in the Division IV state championship game in Columbus.

The fact that Gruner and his Golden Bears teammates even stepped foot on the Cooper Stadium field that day came as a huge surprise to most people in Northwest Ohio.

Kyle Rase was a rookie head coach that season, and Gibsonburg had struggled through a 6-17 regular season.

"We lost six one-run games," Rase recalled. "The Suburban Lakes League is a very tough baseball league. We were the only Division IV team in the league that year and we were playing Division II and Division III teams, outstanding competition. We were right in games and the kids had to believe in themselves that once they got in the tournament, the competition they had played prepared them for the tournament."

The Bears won their first tournament game. Then another. Then another.

"It was a really good group of kids," Rase said. "We may not have had as many



Kyle Rase, left with Ryan Kunk, the actor who will play him in the movie

wins as we wanted in the regular season, but it wasn't for lack of effort. I had no problems with them throughout the year. We caught every break we could in the tournament.”

Next thing the Bears knew, they were playing Lancaster Fisher Catholic for the state championship - and they won, 6-5. They are the only Ohio high school team to win a state title with a losing record (14-17).

“There's always been talk that it would be a good movie or a good book,” Rase said.

Bob Mahaffey thought so.

Mahaffey, a writer, producer and director, started his own company, Xcelerate Media Inc., out of his garage in Dublin, Ohio, in 2003.

Mahaffey is also a 1980 graduate of Elmwood High School, one of Gibsonburg's

SLL rivals, and he still has family living in Wayne, near Bowling Green.

“I was having Thanksgiving last year at my sister's house in Wayne,” Mahaffey said, “and I talked to my niece's husband and he was telling me about this Gibsonburg team. I said this would be a great story for a movie.”

Mahaffey said he called Gibsonburg officials about making an independent film about the 2005 state champion Golden Bears. Soon after, he began writing a screenplay and began searching for actors.

“I got all these college students, some from Ohio State, Ohio University...the college students are doing all the work on this film,” Mahaffey said. “I want to make it a good college experience for the college kids and I want to make a movie we're all proud of.”

Titled ‘Gibsonburg’

Rase said he got a call from Mahaffey last November through Gibsonburg Athletic Director Brent Liskai. Rase said he met with Mahaffey and his staff



It's a celebration! The 2005 Gibsonburg Golden Bears hold up the trophy that proves they are the first team in Ohio high school history to win a state title with a sub-.500 record. (Press photo by Doug Hise)

about a possible independent movie.

“I told most of the (Bears players) in December,” Rase said. “They were excited. To see it actually come to where it was a project in the works, that was when we realized this was going to be happening. It’s a great story about a great group of kids. The movie is 40 percent baseball and will be very close to our tournament run, and there’s a Hollywood plot line. I haven’t helped Bob with that. I pretty much stay with baseball and go through all the games with him.”

Filming for the movie, titled “Gibsonburg,” is still ongoing. The actors portraying the Bears’ players and coaches are college students. Mahaffey’s plan is to submit the film to the Sundance Film Festival by the Sept. 26 deadline. If selected, “Gibsonburg” will be shown at the Festival in January 2012 in Park City, Utah.

The baseball movie scenes are being filmed at three Columbus-area high schools - North Union, Dublin Jerome and Jonathan Alder - and at Huntington Park. Locally, Mahaffey’s crew has filmed several scenes at Gibsonburg’s Ideal Bakery, owned by John Schnell.

“The bakery is the focal point of the movie,” Mahaffey said. “That’s the hangout. That’s the only place we’re shooting in Gibsonburg. When you walk in there you can see it’s swimming with character. It’s been in their family since 1933 and it’s just a beautiful setting for a movie. We’re probably shooting there seven or eight times; we’ve already shot there three times.”

Mahaffey has a \$200,000 budget to shoot the movie. His crew includes Emmy-award winning film maker and Bowling Green native Ginger Kathrens, assistant director Jessica Browne, award-winning music producer Kelly Bryarly and comedienne/actress Judy Tenuta.

“Judy is playing the ‘idiot’ parent we all know,” Mahaffey said, “the one who screams at the umpires and the players. She’ll do terrific in that role.”

Gruner, 24, a senior shortstop/pitcher who scored twice and drove in two runs in the state title game against Fisher Catholic, said a movie about the Golden Bears is “pretty exciting.”

“I knew coach Rase had this idea from the get-go, to get it made into a movie or a book and get some kind of recognition,” Gruner said. “This might be a once-in-a-lifetime thing or once in history thing to do. It’s interesting that people want to show us off a little bit.

“I got a call in late April from the director and he said he was excited and he had been talking to coach Rase. He said they had already written a script and he told me a little bit about it, and he asked if I had anything to add to it.”

Mahaffey said he has talked with every member of the 2005 squad, but one in particular stood out.

“Andy Gruner is the star of the movie,” Mahaffey said. “I’ve spent countless hours with coach Rase and I’ve looked at the (game) footage and gone over every pitch - from their first game against Bettsville to the state finals against Fisher Catholic. From the footage, it seemed that Andy was a very good leader on that team.”

Junior pitcher Alex Black earned the win in the championship game, throwing three innings of one-hit ball in relief of Gruner. Gibsonburg scored what proved to be the winning run in the top of the seventh inning when senior Wes Milleson reached on a two-out error, stole second and later scored on a single by senior Derek Hetrick.

Other Bears who played in the championship game included junior shortstop Wyatt Kiser, senior catcher Thom Brinker, sophomore pinch runner Scott Stevenson, freshman third baseman Cody Fisher, senior first/second baseman Brandon Beck and senior right fielder Derek Eddings.

Black pitched all but 11 innings during Gibsonburg's eight-game tournament run.

“After school that summer I worked up at the school with Derek Eddings and it seemed like we were thinking about it all the time, still not believing we were able to do it,” Gruner said. “Now that the years have gone by, I think about it every couple months. I’ll run across the DVD that we showed at the school ceremony a week after the game, and it really gets my goose bumps going.”

Mahaffey said he plans to have a special viewing of “Gibsonburg,” at no charge, in Gibsonburg next spring.