

Zackham's 'Wedding' directorial debut also marks Greenwich homecoming

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Greenwich native Justin Zackham directing the upcoming comedy "The Wedding" in Greenwich recently. The film is produced by Riverside native Clay Pecorin and directed by Zackham, both Greenwich High School alums. Photo by Barry Wetcher

Justin Zackham's bucket list has a few more check marks on it.

Not only is Greenwich High School alumnus on a first-name basis with Robert De Niro, Diane Keaton, Robin Williams and Susan Sarandon, but he gets to boss them around on the set of "The Wedding."

The big-budget comedy shot in Greenwich marks the directorial debut and homecoming for Zackham, 40, whose break-out film project came in 2007 when he wrote the script for "The Bucket List," starring [Jack Nicholson](#) and [Morgan Freeman](#).

But Zackham is taking a very sober approach to his newfound role, even consulting with other directors such as [Peter Farrelly](#) of "Dumb and Dumber" fame on how to treat the cast members, who also include Connecticut-raised actors [Katherine Heigl](#) and [Topher Grace](#).

"What a lot of them told me is that the big movie stars want to be directed," Zackham said. "Forget about who they are. Forget about what they've done. Forget about what their trophy case looks like."

Lesson No. 1: no gushing over De Niro's Oscar winning performances in "Raging Bull" or "The Godfather" trilogy.

"If you do that, you lose right out of the gate," Zackham said. "I try not to think about that."

Perhaps an even more notable star of "The Wedding" is Greenwich itself.

For the better part of the past two months, Zackham, along with Clay Pecorin, a boyhood friend and fellow Greenwich native who is the film's lead producer, have transformed the town into their very own Hollywood lot, minus the palm trees.

Filming locations have included [Christ Church Greenwich](#), [St. Agnes Church](#), [Gabriele's Italian Steakhouse](#) and a private home in the Stanwich section, to name a few.

"It's been just kind of amazing to come home," Zackham said. "To do something like this with my best friend who I've known since eighth grade, that's the best part."

Zackham went to [Eastern Middle School](#), while Pecorin attended [Central Middle School](#).

They started their own production company, Two Ton Films, which earlier this month sold the distribution rights for "The Wedding" in the U.S. and U.K. to Lionsgate.

"That's enormous," Zackham said.

A [New York University](#) film school graduate, Zackham is best known for his work on "The Bucket List," which turned out to be more than a "cup of coffee" for the up-and-coming filmmaker.

The plot revolves around two adventure-seeking terminal cancer patients, played by Nicholson and Freeman, who meet in a hospital ward and attempt to fulfill as many of their fantasies as possible before they kick the bucket.

Nicholson's character is a billionaire with a penchant for a rare blend of coffee called [Kopi Luwak](#), which [Freeman's](#) blue-collar character reveals is not bitter because it passes through the digestive system of monkeys in Indonesia before it is roasted.

"I was looking for the world's most expensive beverage," Zackham said. "Then when I read the background on that, I thought, how do you not put that in the movie?"

In case you were wondering, Zackham has never had [Kopi Luwak](#).

"I don't drink coffee," Zackham said.

In "The Wedding," De Niro and Keaton play a divorced couple who pretend to still be married for the nuptials of their adopted son, played by [Ben Barnes](#), who is known for his role as Prince Caspian in "The Chronicles of Narnia."

Barnes' character marries [Amanda Seyfried](#), of "Mamma Mia!" and "Mean Girls" notoriety.

Heigl, who attended [New Canaan High School](#) and is known for her roles in the television series "Grey's Anatomy" and the comedy "Knocked Up," plays the biological daughter of De Niro's and Keaton's characters.

Williams plays a priest, Father Moynihan, named after a one-time pastor in town.

Zackham characterized the plot as a dramatic comedy based on the 2006 Swiss-French film "Mon Frere se Marie," but threw away the characters and started fresh.

"I wrote it to be here, but never thought I would get to film it here," said Zackham, whose mother lives on the Greenwich-Stamford border in Dolphin Cove.

Greenwich waived a midnight-to-6 a.m. filming curfew so the producers could shoot a pool scene last month at [Burning Tree Country Club](#), one nearly put in jeopardy by a summer squall.

"There was lightning flashing all around us," Zackham said. "Then the heavens cleared. At 4 o'clock in the morning, Robert De Niro and Katherine Heigl both jumped off the high dive and we called it a wrap. It was a pretty amazing night."

Zackham thanked the town for its cooperation with the project, saying that he and the film's cast and crew plan to reciprocate.

An online auction of film memorabilia benefitting the Boys & Girls Club of Greenwich is scheduled for next spring, according to Zackham, who said each cast member has been asked to contribute something. Among the items that Zackham said people will be able to bid on are "Raging Bull" posters autographed by De Niro.

"Of all of the shows that I've done, this is best crew," Zackham said. "This is the best cast. It's so far beyond my wildest dreams."

The filmmakers also plan to hold a sneak preview of "The Wedding" in Greenwich before its October 2012 release, with the proceeds also going to the Boys & Girls Club.

"I was really touched that they wanted to do something for the Boys & Girls Club," said [Bob DeAngelo](#), the club's executive director.

DeAngelo lives next door to where the movie was being shot in the Stanwich neighborhood and met Zackham.

"He immediately thought of the Boys & Girls Club, which was great," DeAngelo said.

Serving 2,300 members and 500 children on a daily basis, the Boys & Girls is no stranger to celebrities, providing basketball superstar [LeBron James](#) a venue last summer for his ESPN primetime television special on his free agency plans.

The club followed that up by hosting a softball game and lobster bake earlier this summer for the cast and crew of "The Wedding" at Camp Simmons, a 77-acre property it owns on Lake Avenue.

"As you know, they've just got some incredible people in this movie," DeAngelo said.

When Zackham and Pecorin were at Greenwich High School, so was [Mike Gerald](#), who is the club's athletic coordinator.

"That just put a real nice touch on it," DeAngelo said.

Zackham conceded that he hasn't been able to please everyone in his boyhood home, however.

"We sort of had to institute a no-set-visit policy," Zackham said. "It's been tough. I'm sure a couple of cold beers will forgive us."

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