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## Custodians' moving tales stir 'Philosopher Kings' audiences

By Daniel Aloï

Cornell building staff members applauded their colleagues and the makers of "The Philosopher Kings" at a premiere Aug. 26 in Bailey Hall.

The documentary celebrates the wisdom and humanity of eight custodial workers filmed in 2008 at seven universities, including Cornell's James Evener and Gary Napieracz.

A public showing followed a morning screening for more than 400 Building Care and Campus Life custodians. Director of Building Care Rob Osborn hosted a panel of director-producer Patrick Shen, co-producer Greg Bennick and custodians Evener, Napieracz, Oscar Dantzler from Duke University, Melinda Augustus from the University of Florida and JeSue LaJeunesse from Princeton, who answered questions after the screenings. Michael Seals of the University of California-Berkeley arrived on campus to join the afternoon panel.

"To me the movie isn't just about us, it's about everyone out there -- because every one of us has a story to tell,"



Lindsay France/University Photography

**Custodian Gary Napieracz, center, answers questions from a crowd of Building Care employees at a screening of "The Philosopher Kings" in Bailey Hall Aug. 26.**



Lindsay France/University Photography

**Dori Brisbois, a custodian at the Vet College, applauds the cast members and directors.**

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Evener told his coworkers.

The film intertwines their stories, showing the custodians at work and at home, with families and friends. Commentary comes in the form of quotes on heroism, marriage and life from Plato, Joseph Campbell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Arthur Ashe, William Shakespeare and others.

Just as profoundly, the custodians share their lives and what they've learned, often through adversity or tragedy. Evener, who survived being shot in Vietnam, reveals that his wife of 28 years left him; Augustus still mourns the loss of her mother after many years; Luis Cardenas of the California Institute of Technology lost his arm in a car accident, and we see him struggle while changing trash bags. All express hope and perseverance in the face of their situations and setbacks.

Augustus said: "I hope that for everyone who's seeing it, it will make them think to slow down and to not take life for granted."

Part of the filmmakers' initial aim was to "juxtapose the prestige of the school with the lack of prestige seen by society for the people in the film," Bennick said.

In one moving story, viewers learn that LaJeunesse also drives a taxi to help support his large family in Haiti. The filmmakers accompanied him to his native village of La Source, where he and his brother have begun a project to bring clean water to 3,000 villagers who have had to walk 25 miles for it.

"The man has such heart, it's unbelievable," Napieracz said.

Bennick said he and Shen are making a short documentary about La Source, and the charitable organization Generosity Water is now assisting there. Those interested in helping the project can contact Bennick and Shen at Transcendental Films or through the film's Web site, <http://philosopherkingsmovie.com>.

The Cornell screenings kicked off a national tour for the film. Osborn said Evener and Napieracz will attend a Sept. 14 screening at Duke.



*Lindsay France/University Photography*

**Head custodian James Evener participates in the panel discussion following the screening of the documentary.**



*Lindsay France/University Photography*

**Rob Osborn thanks the filmmakers and six of the custodians featured in "The Philosopher Kings" who attended the screening in Bailey Hall.**

"We feel like they've become part of our families," Shen said of the custodians. "These people are happy where they're at [and] with what they have. If they taught a course in that subject, these guys would be great teachers in that course."

Shen said Cornell's workers were unique among those they filmed. "We were shocked to see how much the custodians were cared for at Cornell. We didn't see much of that at all on other campuses. Rob Osborn treats his staff like royalty -- it's absolutely inspiring. It makes me want to give up filmmaking and work for Rob as a custodian."

President David Skorton attended the morning screening. "It was fantastic -- everything about it, the cinematography, the score," he said. "I really hope that someone recognizes it; I know it's been in seven or eight film festivals. It's a fantastic piece."

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