

Sanford Studio
Gets a Starring

ROLE

By Susan
LodenCENTRAL FLORIDA GIVES THE
FILM INDUSTRY ITS BEST SHOT

For eight weeks last year, the cast and crew of Summit Entertainment's *Never Back Down* turned Sanford, Florida, into little Hollywood, and transformed a 1920s-era brick citrus packinghouse into a boxing gym.

Kyle and Tami Kilger aren't actors, producers, directors, writers or even grips or lighting techs. However, they claim ownership to the action feature film *Never Back Down*, as they watch the trailer for the March 2008 release.

"It's our movie," says Tami, who never dreamed of working in the film industry and never got close enough to the *Never Back Down* actors to ask for autographs.

"That's our warehouse! That's our warehouse!" Kyle boasts several times as interior and exterior shots on his computer screen offer glimpses of the Kilgers' business, Best Shot Studios, on North Elm Street in downtown Sanford. For eight weeks last year, the cast and crew of Summit Entertainment's *Never Back Down* transformed the Kilgers' 1920s-era brick citrus packinghouse into a boxing gym.

"There really isn't anything in the area like Best Shot Studios," says Kyle, "especially for downtown Sanford. The local economy saw a surge of dollars from the film. I don't know that any one person made a killing, but it was nice. We own three businesses, so we're beyond being afraid of trying something new."

Tami and Kyle didn't want the 20,000-square-foot, vacant warehouse



***Never Back Down*, which could be described as *Fight Club* for teenagers, was filmed in part at Best Shot Studios in Sanford. The movie is scheduled to be released in March 2008.**

when they bought office space next door in 2001. But it was a package deal, and a good one at that. The pay-off came when their realtor brought a movie location scout to the warehouse. Best Shot Studios was born on the spot.

The cast and crew of *Never Back Down*, hundreds of people who needed food, lodging and other services, quickly followed the scout and helped nudge Sanford another step up the ladder as a film-friendly city. Since *My Girl* was filmed there in 1991, about half a dozen large productions have followed. Almost every month, commercials and industrial films are produced in this quiet, clean, friendly riverfront city in north Seminole County.


"Sanford has an advantage of having a variety of neighborhoods in a number of architectural styles," says Robert Tunis, economic development director for the city. "It's easily accessible with few congestion problems. The city is not jaded to filmmaking. We have turned around film permits, often involving multiple city departments, in as little as a day."

Tami says, "It's almost like cities are bidding for films, with perks and tax incentives. It's a hot industry and everyone wants to be involved." Kyle explains that Big Shot Studios is pro-

active: He's letting filmmakers know they offer a huge, secure space that can be transformed into any type of interior movie set in a city that welcomes the industry.

The success of Best Shot Studios inspired city officials to make Sanford a "Center of Excellence" for Florida filmmaking, Tunis says. "We are going to attract permanent production companies, film technology companies and an education infrastructure serving the industry. Impact on the city is usually minor, while the economic advantages can be substantial. There is also the intangible benefit of national exposure."

Tunis praises the Kilgers' foresight and courage. "The film industry can be cyclical and it probably will be a few months before the studio becomes occupied on a daily basis. I truly believe Best Shot Studios is the harbinger of Sanford as a substantial film center," he says.

Tami says, "It's something we stumbled upon. It took no effort on our part. When you come to Sanford you could be any where in the U.S. There are a lot of options here for filmmakers. Sanford has all the amenities needed for production of any type. Yet it still has a small-town feel. Sanford is unpretentious. It's not really a Florida feel, unless that's what you're looking for." 

>> GREEN SCENES

When it comes to going green in the entertainment industry, Florida is leading the charge by ensuring that film and television productions make environmentally wise choices both on the set and in scripts. The Governor's Office of Film and Entertainment has even established guidelines for the industry, known as the Florida Green Production Plan. Key elements of the plan include recycling everything possible and appropriately handling hazardous materials.

Niki Welge, spokesperson for the state initiative, says, "Filmmakers and decision makers on crews are supportive of the idea of going green. Some environmentally friendly ideas can be implemented on set with little or no effort."

Movie and video makers have the power to encourage green practices by writing examples into scripts that show characters recycling, walking or using alternative transportation, turning off lights and computers when they aren't in use, volunteering for environmental and social causes and much more.

Here in Central Florida, warehouse-turned-set Best Shot Studios is a great example of an environmentally friendly business within the film industry.

"Best Shot Studios, in what was an under-used warehouse in Sanford, really is the ultimate in recycling," says Sanford Economic Development Director Robert Tunis. "Filmmaking probably has one of the smallest carbon footprints of any commercial or industrial activity that could have been envisioned for the site."