

On a hero's quest

Filmmakers join a boy with muscular dystrophy on the trip of his life.

By Karen Day, Special to The Times

August 29, 2007 TOWARD the end of "Darius Goes West," the young man who is the subject of the documentary states matter-of-factly, "People want to be me." Unless you are Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt or blind drunk, few of us could make this claim, but Darius is proved right by the cheering crowds waving at the wheelchair-bound teenager in this unexpected documentary.

Equal parts "Animal House," and "Stand by Me," this buddy flick tells the story of 12 college-age students who contrive with great expectations and minuscule budget to take their friend from Georgia to Los Angeles to get his wheelchair customized on MTV's "Pimp My Ride." It's a comical and poignant tale.

In the movie, playing at Laemmle Music Hall Theatre in Beverly Hills at 8 and 10 p.m. through Thursday as part of an Oscar bid, Darius rolls across the screen like a sonic boom with a smile, shattering the stereotype of disabled kids and embodying a genuine American idol with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a disease with a 100% mortality rate. To date the movie has won 20 "audience choice" awards at 25 film festivals.

The film is a classic hero's tale stuffed into an RV with a dozen guys and their dirty socks. Granted, the Golden Fleece in this movie has been updated and equipped with "spinners" on the wheels and PlayStation 2, but Ulysses and Luke

Skywalker have nothing on 15-year-old Darius Weems.

Along with his brother, Mario, Darius was born with the most common and severe form of muscular dystrophy. Duchenne is the No. 1 genetic killer of children, with all eventually losing control of their muscles and most dying in their late teens and early 20s. Indeed, Mario, who died at 19, is eulogized best by



the indomitable spirit of his younger brother in this film.

"The strong one died," Darius recalls about Mario. "So I had to be the strong one." Approximately 1 in 3,500 boys is born with the disease, with two-thirds of the occurrences attributed to genetics, as was the Weems brothers' affliction. One-third of the time, however, the disease strikes randomly.

This is a film about the transforming power of teamwork and the inherent joys and madness of reaching any seemingly impossible goal. Traversing 7,000 miles of

highway from Athens, Ga., with a disturbing lack of handicap access proves a large enough challenge to Darius and his crew. A cameo on "Pimp My Ride," however, is completely do-able and way cool, according to fans of MTV's mechanical-makeover hit. The show targets an audience between the ages of 12 and 25, and "Darius Goes West" aims to entertain and inform that same age range, according to Logan Smalley, 25, the film's director. His reasons for cultivating these viewers, however, echo far beyond his age.

It is a movie of pain, both physical and emotional, with a message of hope and deep affection for the raw and sweet parts of human nature. Documentaries have a bad habit of working too hard at jerking tears and preaching for change. More often than not, this broad "nonfiction" genre teeters on the edge of tedious.

Thanks to Smalley's editing and Darius' star quality, the documentary and its back story through development and disease make "Darius Goes West" play more like a hip indie film. Smalley, who also composed and plays the piano soundtrack, and his gang bankrolled the \$70,000 film by selling on-screen credits for \$10 each and having a hometown barbecue fundraiser.

The on-screen goal was to reach Los Angeles and convince "Pimp My Ride" that Darius' wheelchair should be tricked out just like the cars on

their favorite show. The tension? The show won't consider entrants unless they are from California. Hence, the road trip is conspired and completed with a rented, wheelchair-accessible RV, with MTV cast in the role of the villain.

But the ultimate purpose for everyone involved in the project is to further awareness and fund research to find a cure for DMD (Duchenne muscular dystrophy). Even the audience contributes, because 100% of box-office profit goes directly to the cause.

"We refer to this as the orphan's disease because it's less known than cancer, ALS and leukemia," Smalley says. "But the cure is right round the corner. It's close."

In the film, hard facts and predictable mortality statistics are woven in by Dr. Benjamin Seckler, who specializes in treating children with Duchenne, between Darius' adventures and scenes of Seckler's 5-year-old son, Charley, as he sleds through the snow with early signs of the debilitating disease hovering closer every day.

"The gene culprit of this disease has been discovered," says Seckler, with steady resolve. Facing heart-break on a daily basis, however, has softened his dark gaze. "Human clinical trials are going on now to produce dystrophin (the protein that connects muscle tissue), but what we need is more funding. More research."

All donations and box-office profit after promotional costs from "Darius Goes West" go to Charley's Fund

(www.charleystfund.org), a nonprofit founded by Seckler and his wife, Tracy, who also makes a heart-tugging appearance in the film. Film clips of their young boy playing normally, but facing the same short future as Darius, makes the Secklers' sense of urgency palpable.

As the doctor said in a recent interview, "We could be a day away from finding a cure, but every day that passes is another day gone for our son."

Despite the certainty of bad news, "Darius Goes West" avoids falling into "the pit of despair." The Secklers' dedication combined with the crew's addiction to cheap jokes and Darius' gangsta-with-a-golden-heart-rapping on the soundtrack prevent the movie from being the bearer of only bad news.

The idea for "Darius Goes West" originated with Smalley, who served as a counselor at Project Reach, a public camp for disabled kids in his hometown. He first met Darius' brother, Mario, at the camp.

"Before he died," Smalley explains in the film, "Mario asked me to take care of Darius. I was too young [16] to know what I was committing to. But Mario knew Darius [9] was old enough to understand.

"I was there the day Darius got his wheelchair," he remembers. "I could see he felt nervous, so I said something about putting chains on the wheels like they were rims. . . of course, he accepted the wheelchair long before I got around to thinking about taking him to 'Pimp My Ride.'

"The film's quiet success, meanwhile, has made Darius a star in his hometown and at film festivals. Delta Airlines has been providing the entire crew free passage, including a trip to a festival in London. Last Friday, opening night on the corner of Wilshire and Doheny, Felicity Huffman and William H. Macy, who clown with Darius and crew in the movie, came to the premiere and the full house erupted in applause when their scenes appeared. The right people are beginning to talk. The buzz has begun.

Meanwhile, Smalley heads to Harvard in September to begin graduate studies in, not filmmaking, but special education. Back home in Athens, Darius has started his senior year of high school. He and his legally blind mother, Jamie, live on welfare in the first projects built in the United States — the same projects where he and Mario were raised. Before the making of "Darius Goes West," the young rapper had never left Athens.

"It's the trip of lifetime," Darius says, looking out over the Grand Canyon with tears in his eyes.

And how does the young hero of DMD feel about the possibility of going to the Oscars? Smalley says, "Darius wants to be a rap star more than a movie star. But if the film gets nominated, he'd really like to take his mom as his date."

"Darius Goes West," 8 and 10 p.m. today and Thursday, Laemmle Music Hall Theatre, 9036 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills. More info: www.dariusgoeswest.com.