

A photograph of Michael Booth, an Emmy-winning writer and producer, sitting at his desk. He is wearing a white shirt with gold embroidery and has a goatee. He is holding a cigar in his right hand. On his desk is a typewriter, a pen holder, and a stack of books. A golden Emmy award is prominently displayed on the desk. The background is a warm, indoor setting with a window.

# Clayton County's EMMY WINNER Michael Booth

by KIMBERLY ALLEN  
photos by MICHIE TURPIN

*Clayton is such a diverse county, filled with people from all walks of life. But would you have ever guessed that an Emmy winning writer and producer lives amongst us?*

"Clayton really is the best of both worlds – a nice, smaller community where you can get to know your neighbors and have access to the world through the airport, concerts, sporting events. Anything that you want is within easy driving distance from here. We also like the friendliness that you don't get in the big city. This is definitely a community that has a lot going for it," says Emmy Award Winner, Michael Booth.

While building a career any writer would envy (myself included), Booth has accomplished much

Determined to break into the field, Michael began freelancing his video scripts and landed more work than he originally anticipated creating short training and public relations films. In between stints for companies like Coca-Cola, he eventually started his own company, Face Communications, where Booth produced videos for corporations and nonprofit organizations. This path led him to Koinonia (pronounced Coy-no-ni-uh) and an Emmy award.

"I did several videos for Habitat for Humanity in the 1990s. They started their own video department, and the daughter of the founder of Habitat for Humanity (Faith Fuller, who directed and co-produced *Briars in the Cotton Patch*) lived in Koinonia as a small child," says Booth. "Faith was working for Habitat at the time, and they gave her the job of making a video about Clarence Jordan (pronounced Jurden), the preacher who started Koinonia Farm. Amazingly, Faith didn't know anything about him, so she did this five minute video and was floored because she had never really heard this story. And the more she talked to people in Sumter County (Georgia), the more she wanted to do this documentary, but knew it was too big for her to tackle alone." Everybody wants to hold the Emmy...

Alicia brings out the golden Emmy award, and I ooh and ahh like a schoolgirl. I suspect others before me

**We were sitting in my parents' bedroom, just decompressing after this big, long day, and Faith calls me and screams, 'YOU WON! You won the Emmy!' and I just said, 'Oh, okay.'**

since writing his first work in the second grade. "I wish I still had that book! My poem was published by the Atlanta schools, and the book had things written by both students and teachers. I was just blown away that something I wrote was actually in print."

After graduating college, Michael's career began as a news reporter for the Douglas County Sentinel. Within three years, he moved on to the Athens Observer, where he advanced to sports editor. Needing a change, he returned to the Atlanta area to serve as an editor of trade publications (*Robotics World* and *Design Graphics World*) but after a few years, his interest began to wane.

"I always wanted to do video work or film work and back in 1974 while we were still in college, a buddy and I made movies on Super 8 cameras. When the Atlanta International Film Festival was still around, they ran a student competition which we entered, and our film won an award! So we were just like, 'Wow we can do this,' says Booth excitedly. "But out in the real world, there weren't many jobs in Atlanta having to do with video."

have asked the Booths to play photographer, since Alicia comes prepared with a camera. She kindly offers to take my picture and I eagerly accept, already anticipating the response when I upload it to Facebook. Ready for my close up, I briefly imagine accepting the statuette while thanking the Academy, but conveniently forgetting everyone else. Its owner, however, still doesn't buy into the hype, as the cobwebs strewn across the award's globe illustrate.

"It was so funny, the night of the Emmy awards I had to be in North Carolina because my sister was getting married, so Faith says 'I'll call and let you know what happens.' So we went to the wedding ceremony and reception and by the time we got home, it was way past 11:00 PM, and I had already forgotten it was Emmy night. We were sitting in my parents' bedroom, just decompressing after this big, long day, and Faith calls me and screams, 'YOU WON! You won the Emmy!' and I just said, 'Oh, okay' (laughs). I never thought that I would win, and it certainly doesn't define me. I just attribute the win to the fact that it was

a great story to begin with." It took two years and 27 versions of the script for Booth to write *Briars in the Cotton Patch: the Story of Koinonia Farm, A True Story of Race, Religion and Terror*. This documentary reveals an overlooked yet extraordinary account of the historical role one Georgia county played in shaping civil rights.

In the early 1940s, most could neither conceptualize nor accept a world where blacks and whites lived as equals in every sense of the word. Clarence Jordan, a white man, made this hope a reality by conducting what he termed an "experiment in Christian living." This experiment created an environment where blacks and whites could co-exist without regard to skin color.

"Jordan was so forward thinking, such a visionary person. His thing was the sharecroppers – he was very upset that blacks were getting paid less than whites even though they did the same work," asserts Booth. "He was all about racial equality."

The ordained minister began by purchasing several acres of farmland in Sumter County near Americus, Georgia. Named Koinonia after the Greek word meaning "Christian fellowship or communion with God or with fellow Christians," all who resided there were paid the same wages for their work, were expected to share possessions, and live on the property together. Blacks and whites on equal footing in any way was unheard of and totally unacceptable during the 1940s south. Yet despite the date, for almost ten years Jordan's experiment was a complete success, until the outside world collapsed onto their nirvana.

While history makes scant reference to how religion was used by racists to bolster and justify their very un-Christian like behavior, *Briars In the Cotton Patch* examines this aspect in depth. Throughout the film, Jordan holds folks accountable for their hypocritical actions during a time when the mere thought of racial equality could end someone's life.

Ultimately, Sumter County shut out all Koinonians – white and black – not only educationally and economically, but in every way possible. Assuming the group was ready to cut and run, the KKK made an offer to buy Koinonia's property, albeit for a fraction of what it was worth. When Jordan rejected their offer, the hate group resorted to type with violence.

Twenty-four years later, Jordan's vision came to life on a slightly different but much larger scale with the creation of what is now known as Habitat for Humanity International, where people of all races work together to build homes for needy families.



"I have talked to so many people who are native Georgians, people who are both conservative and liberal, people that fought against integration, and people who fought for integration, and yet none of them have ever heard of Koinonia or this story," adds Booth.

"The amazing thing was we filmed this in the early 2000s, and even though a lot of this stuff happened back in the 1950s, it was still a sore spot in a lot of people's lives in Sumter. Many people wouldn't even talk with us about it because they were still so upset about Koinonia and the blacks and the whites actually working together, and I'm thinking, 'Oh my God, this is 50 years later and you still haven't come to terms with this?'" laments Booth in disbelief. "So it opened my eyes. Now I know racism still exists in this country, but to actually physically see it on people's faces when I would start to bring up Koinonia was just amazing. They had never forgiven these people for simply eating at the same table with someone whose skin was a different color. It was just totally, totally amazing."

How does such a poignant civil rights story fall through the cracks of American history with barely an honorable mention? After watching this documentary, you will ask yourself the same question, and then some. "When we submitted *Briars* to The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for Emmy consideration, we had to fill out a form. Answering the question, 'Why do you deserve to win an Emmy?' was one of the hardest things for me to write. What I wrote was I don't think that I deserve to win this, the people who lived this story are the ones that deserve all the credit," states Booth. "All I did was take their stories and mold them into a piece that could be shown."

Along with winning the Emmy for scriptwriting, *Briars In the Cotton Patch* was also nominated for an Emmy for its musical score. Additionally, this documentary has won a CINE Golden Eagle Award, was featured at the Atlanta Film Festival, the Asheville Film Festival, the RiverRun International Film Festival (both in North Carolina), and the Ojai (pronounced O-High) Film Festival (California), and has been shown repeatedly on PBS Plus nationwide.

Coming Soon from Michael Booth

"I'm putting together a documentary on the battle of Nash Farm. It wasn't huge, but it changed the course of the war because after this battle, Sherman decided that he couldn't

attack anyone directly, he was going to have to lay siege to it," says Booth. "So that kind of changed the way that Sherman finally won the battle of Atlanta. I think it's interesting not just because of the battle, but because of these people who call themselves Living Historians. It is fascinating how these people dedicate themselves to this piece of history so completely for several weekends a year by living this 1864 lifestyle."

"This is a big deal for Georgia because so many Civil War battlefields are being taken over by shopping centers. We shot footage for three days which included several black people who were representing the union forces. They are so into what they do, their uniforms are made out of wool just like they were back then, when they come into camp they only cook their food over an open fire, they have beautiful reproductions of the weapons that actually use the same kind of gun power. It's amazing the amount of minute detail these Living Historians put into this," Booth says with astonishment. "They don't just pretend to be from this time period, they get into it as much as possible and live it."



"I firmly believe that if you don't know where you come from, you don't know where you're going. I love to read history and, as a newspaper reporter, my editor once told me, 'You're just writing history. In 100 years people could look at your newspaper article and learn something they didn't know,' so I've always thought of myself as recording history in some kind of way. Just like with Koinonia, it is very important to have that link to the past. That is how we're going to move forward as a country."

PBS recently renewed their right to air *Briars in the Cotton Patch*, which is narrated by Atlanta's own civil rights icon Andrew Young. You can order your copy at <http://www.koinoniapartners.org/History/briars/index.html>, and to learn more about Koinonia Farm, go to <http://www.koinoniapartners.org/index.html>.

Michael lives in Jonesboro with his wife, Alicia. His daughter, Taylor, attends the University of Georgia. You can view Michael's most recent video work for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation on YouTube <http://youtu.be/MzK-BYmJ50Y>. **WRC**



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