

Emmy winner returns home to South Milwaukee to enter the city into an HGTV hometown makeover contest

[Erik S. Hanley](#), Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Published 11:56 a.m. CT Feb. 5, 2020 | Updated 11:20 p.m. CT Feb. 5, 2020

Emmy award winner Kyle Olson flew to South Milwaukee from Hollywood to film the city he once called home.

Why? The [Home and Garden Television](#) (HGTV) network is holding a contest through its Hometown Makeover show to revitalize an entire city, and the competition is currently accepting video submissions.

After three years away from his hometown, Olson's plane landed in Milwaukee at 6 p.m. Jan. 31; he left exactly 48 hours later. In that short time, Olson allotted 12 hours to film 12 locations.

Olson said multiple people from his hometown tagged him in a post on social media about the contest asking him to do it for South Milwaukee.

"It is genuinely a good feeling to be asked to come back to the city to tell their story," Olson said. "It's special and something I don't take for granted. It was also really nice to go back home and reexplore my roots."

Part of the reason Olson was sought to film was due to his [Emmy win](#) for best historical documentary at the Mid America Emmy Awards in October 2019. His film "[The Last Signal](#)," focuses on two veterans from World War II who reunited for the first time after 70 years.

Planning the trip

Olson connected with South Milwaukee Mayor Erik Brooks to set up the details, offering his services pro bono if the city would cover the costs of getting him home from Hollywood. A day after the two connected, the details were set and plans were made to fly Olson out.

Part of the agreement included Olson shooting a promotional video for South Milwaukee in addition to the HGTV entry. Olson said he wanted to do the marketing video as “an opportunity to double-dip.”

“We’re walking away with odds in our favor by doing both,” Olson said. “I think we have a good chance to win, but it’s important not to just play the odds in Vegas.”

Laughing, Olson added he didn’t want South Milwaukee coming after him if they didn’t win.

Brooks documented the filming journey on [his blog](#).

“Saturday (Feb. 1) was a day to remember, as the community came together to tell the South Milwaukee story like never before and make the case to HGTV that, while we’re certainly making strides in our redevelopment, we need some help along the way,” Brooks wrote.

For the HGTV video, Olson said a primary focus was Milwaukee Avenue businesses and storefronts — some which have been there for over 100 years.

“The buildings are beautiful in architecture but could use a facelift,” Olson said.

He said both videos use residents to tell the story of South Milwaukee.

One highlight for Olson was seeing [Da Crusher statue](#) for the first time. He said it was great learning about the hometown wrestler’s history. Olson said it was exciting to see how much had changed in the city since he was last in the area.

The new addition Olson was most excited about was a new state-of-the-art audio/video studio in South Milwaukee High School. Olson said when he was in high school about 12 years ago he worked with friends to bring back the AV Club with the goal of eventually getting a full studio. He said it was amazing to finally see that happen.

Olson and crew also visited the American Legion Post 27 near the library. He said that location is a great opportunity for the HGTV video as the building is in disrepair. It's also a good opportunity for the South Milwaukee promotional video to tell the story of local veterans and the place they get to hang out, Olson said.

'Community full of givers'

"South Milwaukee is a community full of givers," Olson said. "This opportunity is for HGTV to help us and then the residents can continue to help more in South Milwaukee. The genuine spirit of South Milwaukee is everyone wants to help."

Olson said there were no problems with the shoot and they got done a little early.

"It was an incredibly ambitious day," he said. "By the grace of God, we did 12 locations in just under 11 hours."

Brooks listed a few of the locations on his blog including Moran's Pub, Avenue Coffeehouse, Parkway Floral, the South Milwaukee Performing Arts Center, and more. He also mentioned an interview with the South Milwaukee Youth Basketball Club sixth-grade girls basketball team for the project.

Olson attributed the success of the day to an "incredible crew" that was composed of locals including director of photography Nick Koscielniak; crew member James Stewart; interns Sasa Miladinovic and Julia Beck (from the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh); and editor Mitchell Stewart.

Olson and Koscielniak first started making videos together in high school. Olson said it was great working together in their hometown again.

Post-production on the HGTV video started shortly after filming and Olson said it should be submitted on Feb. 7. As for the South Milwaukee promotional video, tentatively called "The Story of South Milwaukee," Olson said that will be completed in the next few weeks.

Brooks highlighted local photographers Julie Arnold and John Krecji who provided content. Additionally, numerous sponsors helped make the video a reality including Da Crusher Foundation, Molthen-Bell & Son Funeral Home, Moran's Pub and DB Tax & Financial Services. Brooks also thanked the South Milwaukee Performing Arts Center "for their support of this economic development and community building project."

If he had one regret, Olson said he wished he had time to speak with more people before heading back to Hollywood.

There's no rest in his new home, however, as Olson is hard at work on various projects, including another Milwaukee-focused podcast he'll be working on throughout 2020.

A few years ago, Olson produced a documentary called "Letters to Ashleigh," recounting the unsolved Milwaukee murder of 19-year-old [Ashleigh Love](#) who was fatally shot by an intruder in 2009 while she was sleeping.

The killer was never found.

The podcast will pick up where the documentary ended.