

CALGARY HERALD

From young star to 'cagey old veteran', Jason Priestley marks 30 years as director

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My Life with the Walter Boys. (L to R) Nikki Rodriguez, director Jason Priestley and Noah LaLonde on the set of My Life with the Walter Boys. Cr. Chris Large/© 2023 Netflix, Inc.

Depending on your age, it may seem strange to hear Jason Priestley refer to himself as a “cagey old veteran.” For those of a certain vintage, he just seems forever young.

As an actor, he is still best known for his decade-long run in the 1990s playing earnest teen Brandon Walsh on the wildly popular high school drama *Beverly Hills 90210*, a show that catapulted him to stardom. But even before that role, the Canadian actor/director had a few years under his belt, having landed commercials and guest-star roles on TV series in the mid-1980s when he was a teenager. Since then, he has continued to act and direct – at the time of this interview, Priestley had just celebrated his 30th-anniversary directing films and television – including a two-episode arc of Netflix’s *My Life with the Walter Boys* during the summer of 2022.

In an interview with Postmedia not long after wrapping his episodes on the Alberta-shot series, Priestley uses the above description when asked about directing fellow actors. The series, which begins streaming Dec. 7, is a fish-out-of-water tale about a teen from Manhattan named Jackie (Nikki Rodriguez) whose life is upended after the death of her parents forces her to live on a sprawling Colorado ranch inhabited by 10 Walter siblings. Two of the boys, the bookish Alex (Ashby Gentry) and his older brother Cole (Noah LaLonde), a former high-school football star whose glory is cut short by an injury, enter into a wholesome “love triangle” with the new arrival. The household is overseen by parents George (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s Marc Blucas) and Katherine (Sarah Rafferty, from *Suits*). As a director, Priestley found common ground with these fellow veterans. But his unique experiences in Hollywood also made him well-suited to direct the three young stars of the series, all relative newcomers to the industry.

“Working with the younger actors that aren’t as seasoned as the older actors is a lot of fun for me,” Priestley says. “I remember when I was a young actor myself. I got a lot of great guidance from certain directors who really helped me early on in my career. I enjoy trying to fill that role for young actors if I can. I think that’s part of your responsibility is to take that time with young actors and help to guide them if you can. It’s one of the things I enjoy about directing.”



Ashby Gentry and Noah LaLonde in *My Life with the Walter Boys*. Courtesy Netflix.

Rodriguez, Gentry and LaLonde are not complete newbies. Rodriguez is probably best known for her season-long arc in Netflix's comedy-drama *On My Block*, where she played tough girl Vero in a role that seems the polar opposite of Jackie. Up until the *Walter Boys*, LaLonde had mostly starred in short films. The Michigan native played hockey for 17 years before turning his attention to acting, moving to the Detroit area and cutting his teeth with groups such as The Actor's Loft and LaValle Actors Workshop. The Phoenix-born Gentry received his BFA in acting from Boston University, but before landing the *Walter Boys*, his only major acting role was in an episode of Nickelodeon's reboot of *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*

So while they may be newcomers, all three have developed methods to find common ground with their characters.

"A lot of those experiences weren't that difficult for me because I'm an only child," says Rodriguez. "Especially with the family scenes, it really felt like 'Wow, this is a lot ...' but in the best way, because it was super chaotic. I feel like with every character I play, I blend my own life and my character's life. So there's a little bit of me.

LaLonde says his character – popular jock turned troubled teen after losing his social position as a school football star – has a complicated arc but he could dip into his own experiences as a former athlete who gave up the game.

"Playing hockey, and that being such a big part of my life, there were some really strong parallels," he says. "When I stopped playing hockey, I was 19 years old and it was all I was. There are differences in how we left our respective games, but the feeling of being something and then not having anything to do with that and wondering if you are going to walk outside and people are going to know: Are you still that person? Are you wearing a costume? I remember feeling that and it was really scary for me to see friends I knew and they would say 'How's hockey going?' This thing that was every day is now nothing. Cole gets that taken from him by way of injuries, but there are a lot of parallels there in that feeling of waking up one day and everything is different and not knowing what to do with that."

Speaking of life changes, while Netflix hasn't announced if *My Life With the Walter Boys* will continue, producers and cast are hoping for multiple seasons. If the show finds success, particularly with a younger demographic, the three young actors could find themselves dealing with fame. This, of course, is old hat for Priestley. He found worldwide fame while in his early 20s.

"On occasion, (young actors) do ask me for advice and I'm happy to give them advice when I can," he says. "The industry nowadays has changed somewhat from the meteoric rise on television that I went through. It's a slightly different landscape these days given social media and everything kids have to wrestle with today. I don't envy all of that. But I try to help them where I can."

My Life with the Walter Boys starts streaming on Dec. 7.