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Former Corry standout athlete makes acting career as Cris D'Annunzio

Former Corry football star scores as actor

By DAVE RICHARDS dave.richards@timesnews.com

Near the end of a morning phone interview from Los Angeles, actor/writer Cris D'Annunzio made a plea.



Former Corry resident Cris D'Annunzio stars as a sadistic killer who takes a reporter on an emotional thrill ride she will never forget in "Clemency." Contributed art.

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Typically, writers start features like this with the subject sitting in a fancy cafe, sipping a fancy drink, said D'Annunzio, who grew up in Corry as Chip Nuzzo, a standout athlete.

Don't do that.

"I've been sitting in the car," said D'Annunzio, 44, who looks as rugged as a brick wall. "I would say I had a very workmanlike approach to being an athlete, and I've had a very workmanlike approach to being an actor. I'm not sitting here with my pinkie in the air."

In other words, D'Annunzio worked and studied hard to become a successful actor and playwright after he enjoyed a brief career with the Buffalo Bills. Nothing was handed to him.

He's earned roles in TV hits such as "Law & Order," "Seinfeld" and "Without a Trace." He's appeared in notable films, including "American Gangster" with Russell Crowe and Denzel Washington; "Alien Resurrection"; and "Across the Universe."

He's also done theater, including "Digging Up Dad," his well-reviewed, one-man, autobiographical play at the Ruskin Group Theatre in Santa Monica, Calif.

"Dad" -- which he completed after urging by Kevin Spacey -- has performed so well that the original six-week run was extended by two weeks through April 2.

"The show is really about my relationship with my father, as far as trying to come to terms with it," said D'Annunzio, who hopes to eventually bring it to New York (and possibly Erie). "My parents split when I was 12. I didn't really know my father all that well.

"Then, he died when I was 25 under very strange circumstances. The show tries to determine ultimately what was the cause of his death, and I'm sort of coming to terms with my relationship."

D'Annunzio grew up in an Italian-American household with his parents and grandparents; the latter arrived via Ellis Island. That's how his grandfather Antimo D'Annunzio became Andy Nuzzo.

"They shortened it," said D'Annunzio, who visited his grandparents' home during a trip to Italy a decade ago with his sister Jody. That visit inspired him to legally change his name after Sofia, his first daughter, was born.

"I did it mainly to honor my grandfather," D'Annunzio said. "I know that when he came to this country, he had certain ideas of what America was and stood for. And I wanted to instill that in my children."

That nobility is no surprise to Virginia Grice, his mom, who knows he's a softy at heart.

"He looks like a very mean person, but he totally is not," said Grise, the executive director of the Erie County Housing Authority and Corry Housing and Redevelopment Authority. "He's very soft-spoken and gentle. He's a gentleman and the best father I've ever seen. I'm lucky to have such a wonderful son."

She didn't even mind him changing his first name. One of D'Annunzio's idols -- Mike Piazza of the New York Mets, his favorite team -- had disparaged the name Chip. Referring to Atlanta's Chipper Jones, he said no grown man should be called Chip.

"I said, 'You know what? I'll go by my middle name instead,'" recalled D'Annunzio.

In Corry, though, they remember him as Chip Nuzzo, football, track and basketball star. He played quarterback his senior year and made Corry's Sports Hall of Fame in 2009.

"He started on both sides of the ball and did a tremendous job," said Joe Sanford, his former coach. "His acting talents did not surface in high school; he wasn't in plays or anything. But it doesn't surprise me at all. Without a doubt, I'm sure with his hard work ethic and from his intelligence on the field that he navigates himself real well on the stage."

D'Annunzio still relishes those days. "Not even a day goes by that I don't recollect the time of having played football at Corry and the great experiences I had," he said. "One thing I learned specifically by being an athlete in Corry is it's not about whether you can take a hit. It's whether you can take a hit and keep moving forward.

"That happens to me almost on a daily basis as an actor. I'm constantly being met with rejection and having to hurdle obstacles. It's not an easy profession to pursue."

D'Annunzio later played at Princeton University. After graduating in 1987, he tried out for the Buffalo Bills but was cut in camp. That season, however, NFL players went on strike. He said the owners anticipated it.

"They had us sign contracts that we'd play in the event of a strike. At that time, all I wanted was to play," D'Annunzio said.

In his first game against the Colts, with family in the stands, D'Annunzio made his presence felt on the opening kickoff.

"Nobody blocked me; I don't know why. I went down and tackled the runner on the 13-yard line," he recalled. "To have made a good play in that situation was exciting."

The next season, he attended the San Diego Chargers' camp but didn't make it. D'Annunzio stayed in California and renewed his friendship with a former Princeton teammate, Dean Cain, then starring in TV's "Lois and Clark -- The New Adventures of Superman."

"I had no intention of getting into acting, but I had done a little acting when I was in college," D'Annunzio said. "I spent summers at Chautauqua Institution and happened to get involved in a play when the John Housemen Acting Company was doing summer stock. I really enjoyed it.

"But, having grown up in Corry, that wasn't something I was inclined to pursue because we just didn't do that kind of thing. But the more I was here in California, I was hanging out with Dean and I met actors and started taking acting classes. Dean got me on his show and one thing led to another."

Since then, he's landed steady work, though he hasn't risen to the A-list like some of his buddies -- Jeremy Renner, Mark Ruffalo and Nicolas Cage.

"I'm not at the point where I'm choosing roles; roles are sort of still choosing me," said D'Annunzio. He still does commercials and occasional short films such as "Clemency," a 19-minute thriller now playing film festivals in which he's a calculating, sadistic killer.

Director Joseph Albanese said D'Annunzio was terrific, though he held back in rehearsals.

"He could tell I was a little worried about what we'd get when the cameras were rolling," Albanese said. "He called me and said, 'Don't worry about it, Joe. When the camera rolls, I'm going to bring it.'"

"Sure enough, when we started filming, he nailed the role perfectly. I knew right there we had something good. I couldn't have asked for anything better, he was phenomenal."

For every "Clemency," D'Annunzio has enjoyed high-profile work, if not big parts, in shows such as "Seinfeld" and "Law & Order."

"I've been fortunate that when I've gotten work, it's been in well-received or well-known shows or movies," D'Annunzio said, citing 2007's "American Gangster" as the highlight. He played a detective alongside Josh Brolin, now an A-List star.

"I couldn't be happier for somebody. He was such a great person to work with," D'Annunzio said. "I felt the same about Crowe and Washington, though I didn't work with them as much. They were professionals. Crowe, in particular, has a reputation for being a little difficult and a diva, but I didn't see that at all."

Crowe splurged on the New York City set by renting a Mud truck to supply the crew and cast with coffee the entire day.

Hanging out with Crowe, Washington, Brolin and director Ridley Scott, Cris D'Annunzio sipped his coffee for free that glorious day, no pinkie in the air.

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