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Mesa native off to a big start in Hollywood

BY JOSH ORTEGA
Tribune Staff Writer

Angel Ruvalcaba learned firsthand there are no small parts in Hollywood, only small actors.

The 26-year-old Mesa native worked as a production assistant on the Disney movie "Encanto," which last weekend won the Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature Film.

That means two movies with Mesa connections were honored with Oscars last weekend as Troy Kotsur won Best Supporting Actor for his role in "CODA" and became the first deaf actor to win one of the coveted awards.

While Ruvalcaba's name only appears in the credits, winning an Oscar is "surreal,"

he said.

"To me, that Oscar is my family's sacrifice," he said.

In January 2021, he started with Disney Animation and said working on "Encanto" made him realize "why decisions were made from a storytelling perspective."

The film focuses on the Madrigals, an extraordinary family that live in a place called the Encanto in the mountains of Colombia. The Encanto has blessed every child with a unique gift except Mirabel. When she discovers the community is in danger, she may be the last hope to save her home.

Ruvalcaba's duties included maintaining calendars, following up with artists, and sitting in on meetings and taking notes.

But he also got to give some input, considering the movie revolves around a His-



Mesa native Angel Ruvalcaba worked on the Oscar-winning animated Disney film, "Encanto." (Special to the Tribune)

panic family.

"It was a very administrative role," he said. "But in the same sense I was always involved with the artist."

Ruvalcaba's family brought him to Ari-

zona when he was 11 from California and he knew he wasn't in Kansas anymore.

"I was confused and shocked by all the

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New Arizona organization celebrates baseball

BY MIKE PHILLIPS
Tribune Guest Writer

Baseball is back. The games have returned. Excitement and anticipation fill Cactus League stadiums and Valley watering holes.

But baseball never really leaves the Arizona desert. It's a year-round enterprise woven into our economy, culture and history. While the Cactus League rules March and the Diamondbacks dominate summer, there is a never-ending menu of baseball on local diamonds.

Between the Fall League, extended spring training, instructional and rookie leagues, college, high school and Little League, you can find a game on almost every day of the year.

A new nonprofit seeks to celebrate that heritage and educate the public about its impact and significance. It's called Arizona Baseball Legacy and Experience - ABLE, for short.



The Mesa Historical Museum is home to an extensive collection of Cactus League memorabilia. (Special to the Tribune)

Arizona's long been a destination for baseball insiders and fans. The Society for American Baseball Research (the Moneyball people), chose Phoenix as its headquarters a decade ago after a national search.

The annual NINE Conference takes place every year in Tempe. It brings together baseball writers, scholars and other aficionados to explore among other things the

history, law, sociology, literature, media and architecture of baseball.

The event took place earlier this month despite the Major League lockout. One of NINE's highlights is presentation of the Seymour Medal Award, which goes to the best baseball book of the year. The 2022 winner is author Steve Treder for "Forty Years a Giant: The Life of Horace Stone-

ham."

Stoneham owned the San Francisco Giants for 40 years, starting in 1936. He and the Indian's Bill Veeck relocated their clubs from Florida to Arizona in 1947, starting the westward movement of teams that created the Cactus League.

Today, half of Major League Baseball trains in the Valley. The six weeks of Cactus League bring an economic windfall of nearly \$650 million, roughly the impact of a Super Bowl, every single year.

Baseball radiates here, it's as much a part of our landscape as granite mountain peaks and swimming pools. We are, without doubt, the center of the baseball universe.

That's a title to cherish, cultivate and celebrate. And that's the mission of ABLE.

Our organization seeks to honor and recognize all things Arizona baseball. That's a huge goal and one that we know will take time to achieve. But we're taking first

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open space," he said.

Ruvalcaba said he had his fingers crossed that the movie would win an Academy Awards and is also celebrating his recent promotion to production coordinator.

"I'm totally content in working in production for the next 10 years," said Ruvalcaba, who lives in Burbank with his fiancée, an artist in animation and character design. The couple met in 2018 while they worked for an animation company in Arizona and they plan to get married in November.

Ruvalcaba said that talented people sometimes get overlooked due to their lack of proximity to Tinseltown.

"Unfortunately, sometimes if you're not in Hollywood, it can be easy to not get the recognition you deserve," he said.

He said the movie reminded him of his strong connection to his family in Mesa and how hard he's worked to make them proud.

"I really resonate with the idea of family comes first," he said. "And how important it is to love and take care of your family."

The impactful themes shared by the Madrigals in the movie also remind him of his own family's values and much of his hard work that he's put into his career derives from making his family proud. "I want my name and their name to mean

something," he said.

He grew up a second-generation American and the oldest of four boys whose grandparents immigrated from Mexico.

He said his favorite movies included Disney's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" and Pixar's "Toy Story."

In 2013, he graduated from Skyline High School as the first of his family to do so. Soon after, he attended Mesa Community College.

During the fall 2014 semester, he participated in the Disney College Program and that started him on his journey working for both Disney California Adventure Park and Disneyland.

He graduated in 2017 with an associates of arts in digital illustration and transferred to Arizona State University, graduating two years later with a bachelor of arts in filmmaking practices - another family-first.

He said there was a lot of pressure to make something of himself but credits a lot of success to his mother's support.

"My mother always believed in me," he said. "She supported me every step of the way." Ruvalcaba said his ethnicity remains important to his identity and he wants people to unite around our variety.

"I don't want what differences we have to create borders," he said. "I want it to bring us together." ■

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steps. We're partnering this spring with the Mesa Historical Museum on an exhibit focused on the Cactus League Hall of Fame. Every member of the Hall of Fame has a story, part of a mosaic that speaks to the magic and allure of Arizona baseball.

Tour the exhibit and you'll learn the journey of Yosh Kawano, who as a child in 1935 stowed away on a boat to attend Cubs training games on Catalina Island. His daring adventure launched a seven-decade career as an equipment manager for Major League clubs.

Between his Catalina escapade and his Major League career, Kawano was held at a World War II Japanese internment camp near Yuma. That, too, is part of his story and part of the Mesa exhibit. Kawano's camp would grow to 18,000 residents, making it the third largest "city" in Arizona.

Baseball, already deeply ingrained in Japanese American culture, would become the No. 1 pastime at the camps.

Baseball, many internees say, helped them cope with the isolation and pain of

that dark time. At one camp near Maricopa, there were 32 teams competing in three different leagues. Games drew thousands of spectators. On display in Mesa are stories from that era plus a jersey, baseball, photos and a championship banner.

Yosh Kawano's unlikely voyage and the internment camp leagues are just two of many stories you'll discover at the Mesa exhibit. Each one is part of our collective heritage and a connection to a game that's ingrained in our society and geography.

Baseball is America's game and a gem in the crown of our state. Arizona Baseball Legacy ad Experience seeks to celebrate that relationship -- past, present and future.

Learn more by visiting us online at ABLEAZ.org and check out the Mesa Historical Museum exhibit. The museum, 2345 N. Horne Road, is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is \$7 for adults, \$5 for seniors and \$4 for youth 6-17. Museum members and children 5 and under are free.

Mike Phillips is board president of the nonprofit Arizona Baseball Legacy and Experience. ■