

Will MPA contest winner's mommy let him attend 2009 MPA Winter Convention? (Check MichiganPress.org for updates!)

By Pete Cunningham

Meet Ryan Michaels. Ryan Michaels is an award-winning journalist who does movie reviews for Heritage Newspapers, Inc. Ryan's reviews are printed in the *Saline Reporter* and *Milan News-Leader*, published online and occasionally broadcast over the Internet.

Ryan Michaels is 11 years old.

The "award winning" aspect of Ryan's title refers to the Michigan Press Association's 2008 Better Newspaper Contest. Two weeks ago, Ryan received honorable mention in the category of Local Columnist for a weekly paper with a circulation under 4,000. I'll give you one guess as to who didn't.

Yeah, that's right. I was beat by a sixth grader. For the past year-and-a-half, I've had my eyes on the local columnist contest, and two weeks ago I was beat by someone who couldn't compete unless his homework was done, room was clean and had mom's permission. I owe the U.S. women's gymnastics team an apology ... I feel your pain.

I'm a competitive person who loves to win almost as much as I hate to lose. Losing to an 11-year-old did not set well with me, so I did some research, read his reviews and watched his webcasts. He mixed interesting insight on the latest blockbusters with bragging about graduating from elementary school. I was clearly out of my league.

Once the wave of depression surrounding losing to a preteen passed, I decided Ryan was someone worth meeting. As I attempt to move up in the journalism field, higher-ups have encouraged me to seek advice from peers; contact those who have accomplished the goals you're striving toward. With this in mind, I set up a business dinner with Ryan. So what if it had to be before his bedtime?

Ryan's mother Debbie ignored the potential creepiness of a 24-year-old calling to see if her son wanted to go to the movies, and agreed to let Ryan

and I review a movie together. I assumed anything R-rated was out of the question because when I was 11 seeing an R-rated movie was enough to get me grounded for a week. Of course, I wasn't winning professional journalism competitions at age 11 (or now for that matter), so Ryan could have been operating under a completely different set of rules.

Despite his fame, R-rated movies are a rarity for Ryan, so we decided upon the PG-13 comedy "Ghost Town."

We rendezvoused at Panera Bread in Ann Arbor last Wednesday. After an in-depth discussion over "Ghost Town," the topic quickly shifted to various other films. We shared thoughts on "Dark Knight," "No Country for Old Men," "Burn After Reading" and "There Will Be Blood." His well-articulated opinion on these films was a credit to the fine education he must be receiving at Emerson School in Ann Arbor. At the same time, it was an indictment on the ticket takers at Quality 16 Theatres. How was Ryan getting into these movies?

In addition to his vast movie knowledge, Ryan shared his future aspirations. He's interested in the film industry, either as an actor, director or critic. Look for him on a marquis near you. We spoke over cookies and hot chocolate for about 45 minutes, and I realized I had fallen to a worthy foe.

A woman at a nearby table overheard our discussion and was so impressed by Ryan's intelligence beyond his years that she took it upon herself to come over and meet him. I tried to explain to her the premise of our meeting and the article I intended to write, but she would quickly interrupt to ask Ryan more questions. It was clear who the star was.

Ryan politely blushed and thanked her for her praise, until she finally acknowledged my existence and asked for a business card ... she needed something to write Ryan's blog address on.

Second fiddle again.

Pete Cunningham writes for the *Homer Index*.

MPA Better Newspaper Contest Chair (and *State Line Observer* publisher) **David Green** read Cunningham's column and wrote "The award to an 11-year-old was certainly a discussion in this office. Perhaps the reprint of Pete's column would spice up the Bulletin. The young movie critic is an amazing writer and thinker, and Pete's effort to meet him goes beyond the usual. Hurray for small weeklies, or something like that..."

NOTE: MPA World Headquarters has extended an invitation to Michaels and Cunningham to be guests at the Feb 6-7 2009 MPA Winter Convention.

Candidates discuss FOIA

Continued from the front

earmarks and lobbyist contacts online; and allowing five days for public to review and comment on legislation online before its signed.

In an October 2007 speech, Obama pledged to "turn the page on a growing empire of classified information, and restore the balance we've lost between the necessarily secret and the necessity of openness in a democratic society by creating a new National Declassification Center."

Past is Prologue

One of Obama's most visible Senate actions on the open government front was his co-sponsorship of the Federal Funding Accountability and

Transparency Act, which went into effect Jan. 1, 2008 with the launch of USAspending.gov, a Web site that gives people access to information on government contracts, grants and other awards.

The *Chicago Sun-Times*, however, pointed out several instances where Obama's transparency has been a little more opaque. Among them is the inability to produce records from his term as state senator, which Obama says is due simply to the lack of archivist resources.

Senator Obama is a supporter of the reporter shield law that is currently being discussed in the U.S. Senate.