

My Dinner with
**MICHAEL
BLAKE**

By Geoff Young





Michael with a young mustang who was rescued by Zuma's Rescue Ranch.

The author of the book and award-winning screenplay, *Dances With Wolves*, appears to live a life much like that of the Comanche Indians he so poignantly portrayed in his books. It's a life of freedom, unencumbered by the responsibilities "the civilized" have to live with.

I first heard Michael speak at the annual fundraiser for Zuma's Rescue Ranch, an exceptional and effective not-for-profit that rescues and rehabilitates horses and at-risk youth. Michael is an advocate for Zuma's and is passionate about the welfare of people and horses. That passion for public service has garnered Blake many awards including the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for work with minorities and the environment, the Animal Protection Institute's Humanitarian of the Year award, and the U.S. Air Force's Americanism Award.

There was another award that Blake had won and it was through this award that I became a fan of his work. I arranged to be invited for dinner with Michael at the home of Paul and Jodi Messenich, the founders and care takers of Zuma's Rescue Ranch, where Michael was staying for a few days before heading back to his ranch "Wolf House," in Arizona.

Michael Blake is the most unassuming academy award winner there is. The author of the book and award-winning screenplay, *Dances With Wolves*, appears

to live a life much like that of the Comanche Indians he so poignantly portrayed in his books. It's a life of freedom, unencumbered by the responsibilities "the civilized" have to live with, is how Blake characterized it in an earlier interview.

Blake left Hollywood with its top prize and returned to the American West he loved, becoming an advocate for our wild horses, our native bison, disadvantaged people and minorities, and especially the Native Americans. And yes, he is still writing books.

"November 9th will be the 20th anniversary of the release of *Dances With Wolves*," Blake informed me over a table filled with pasta, salad and wine. I tried to keep from gushing – "I've seen that movie at least 15 times," I said enthusiastically. "I understand Kevin Costner encouraged you to write *Dances*, but it could have been a public relations spin. What's the story?"

"Well, I had been writing screenplays for years with limited success, and over dinner at Kevin's little place, he was just starting to get known in movies, I told



Michael Blake and HC publisher Geoff Young

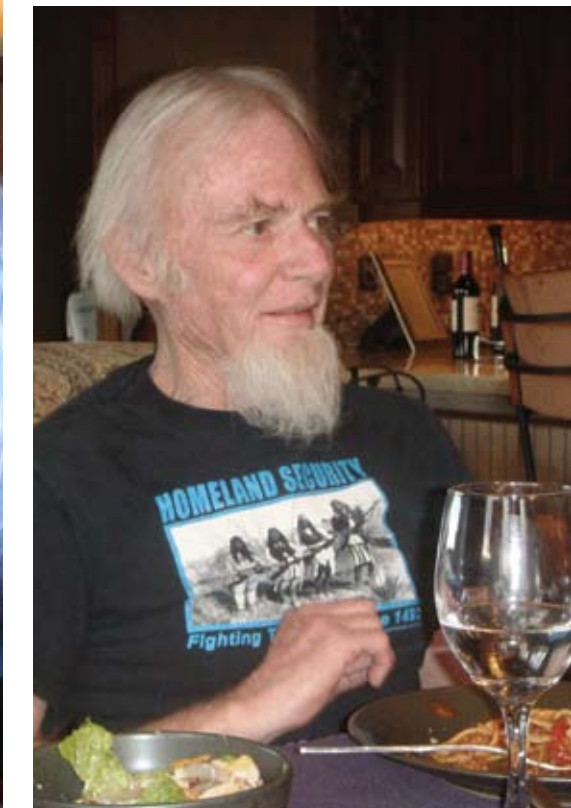
him that I had been reading all of these books on Native American history and one particular story about this guy who took a wagon out to this army post in Kansas during the Civil War, and nobody was there. And I was thinking 'what if that was me? Would I stay or would I go?' and I think I would have stayed. And I said 'I think this would make a great movie Kev.' He said 'Michael, don't write any more movies.' He then pointed to a stack of screenplays on a table and said, 'you write another script and it's going to end up in a stack like that. Write a book man, write a book.'

So, I went off to my janitorial job and thought about what Kevin had said and decided to write the book. It was 1970 and I drove around LA for a year sleeping on people's couches and in the car while I wrote the book. Man, I was broke."

"That must have been a difficult environment to write in," I said. Blake looked at me with a twinkle in his eye.

"You know what I remember most about writing the book was I was half way through and I didn't have a title and it was freaking me out! I finally came up with it while I was thinking about how Dunbar (Costner's character) went to see the Indians, and the wolf Two Socks was following him, like my dogs would follow me, and I thought what if Two Bears (the Comanche warrior) was coming down and saw Dunbar and the wolf running back and forth with each other? I think that he might call him *Dances With Wolves* – hey, that's the title! I was so relieved and happy to finally have a title to the book."

After the wine glasses had been refilled I wanted to talk to Michael about the project he spoke about at the fundraiser. "The other night you announced that you were starting the American West Party. Can you tell me a little bit more about it?"



I couldn't stop looking at Michael's tee shirt. "Homeland Security" it said across the top, and underneath was the famous Curtis photograph of a group of Apache warriors holding guns. And under the photo it said, "Fighting Terrorism Since 1492."



"The BLM doesn't talk to the people, they talk to the corporate interests, and yes, we're doing the same thing to the wild horses that we did to the buffalo, the wolves, and the Indians. We need to break the cycle. That's what the American West Party should really be about – breaking the cycle and bring things back in – to be connected again."

"The American West Party is a non-political coming together to build up and save what's left of the West—saving the last of the wild horses and to try to get people involved to do what people have talked about wanting to do for decades, and that is to establish a Buffalo Commons. If the Party could acquire three or four million acres – and we're only talking about one to two percent of our public lands, then we could set aside this land as a preserve for the buffalo to run free, along with the wild horses and the wolves."

"What else would be on the American West Party agenda?"

"I would like to see the Native Americans involved – for the first time really. It would be a chance to give the Indians stewardship of the land again. I want to inspire, not as a political thing, but just to build the land back up. I would like to convince states to make laws prohibiting the shooting of bears, wolves, or wildlife for fun. And if you get caught you are exiled from the West."

"That is an interesting idea and a unique punishment - being exiled. Throw the bums out and don't let them back to exploit the land and the resources. I

wonder if we could do that to the BLM?" I said with a grin. "How do we get this party started?"

"I'm going to put up a website on September first, and then travel all over the West talking about this and getting people involved. We're starting from nowhere, but some of the best things have started from nowhere."

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Michael became animated as he continued on about the American West Party. "It's not Democrats or Republicans, it's Americans wanting to preserve our lands. This is our spot on the earth, shouldn't we be allowed to preserve it?"

"The establishment of the Buffalo Commons is right in line with your passion to save our wild horses isn't it," I asked?

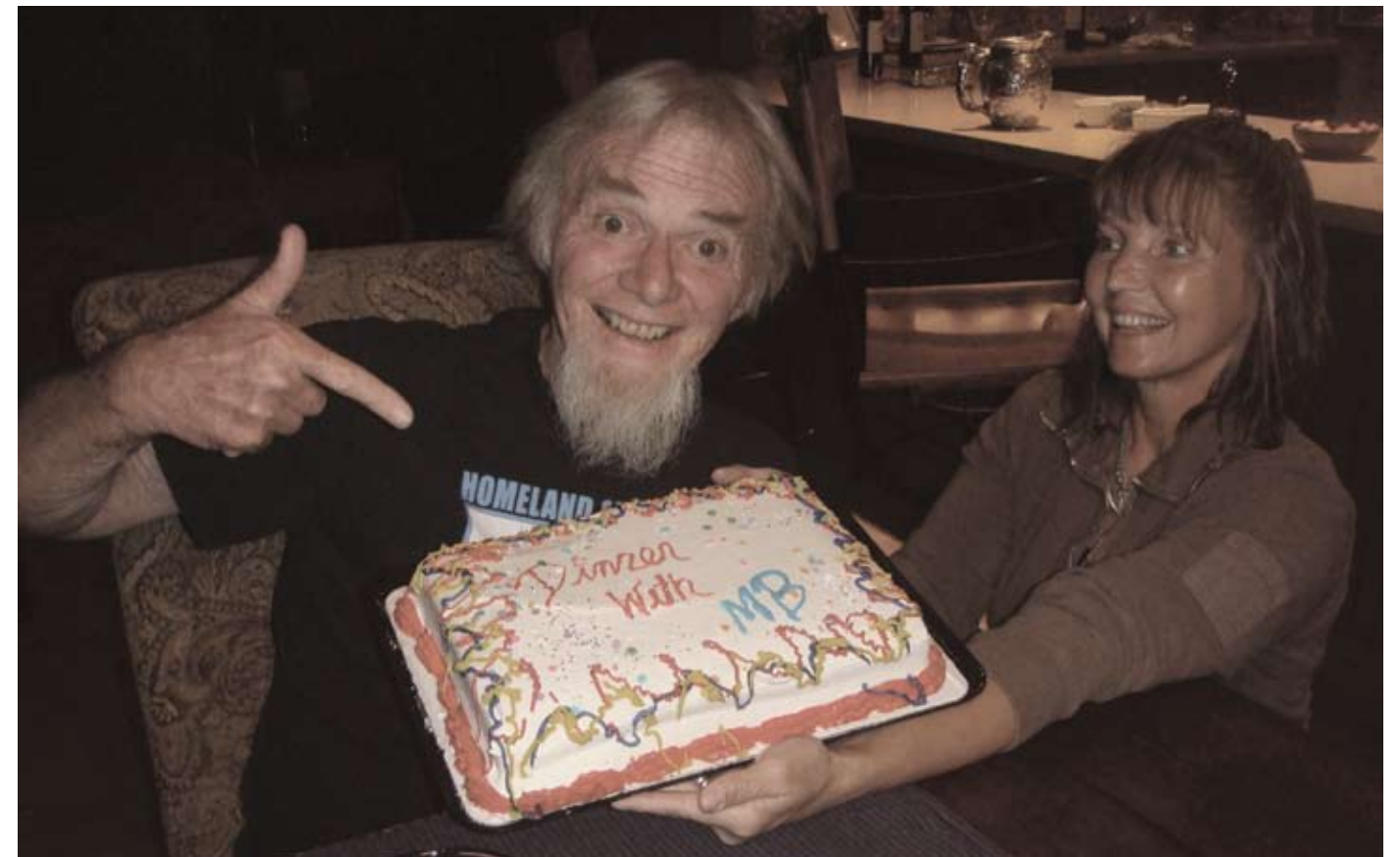
"Very much so," Blake said. "The value of a Buffalo Commons, in my view, is to bring back a piece of the West the way it was before it was destroyed. It could inspire people! It would be wonderful to bring these native animals back to live in balance with the land. The Indians understood that everything is connected – but we've thrown it all away."

"One of your books, *Twelve The King*, is about the mustang stallion that you adopted many years ago. Was that the beginning of your involvement in the preservation of the wild horses?"

"Yes, *Twelve* taught me so much about living on earth. Not anything specific, but just his being impacted me."

"I can't help but see the parallels between what the BLM is doing to the wild horses and what we did to the buffalo. The desired result is extinction of the species."

Blake nodded in agreement. "The BLM doesn't talk to the people, they talk to the corporate interests, and yes, we're doing the same thing to the wild horses that we did to the buffalo, the wolves, and the Indians. We need to break the cycle. That's what the American West Party should really be about – breaking the cycle and bring things back in – to be connected again."



Jodi Messenich presents Michael with a cake commemorating the HC dinner interview

Organizing the American West Party is, for Blake, akin to writing *Dances With Wolves*. As he put it, "I'm not doing this for money or fame. Like *Dances*, I'm doing it from the heart."

We sat back satisfied from the meal, and I wanted to go find a teepee to sit in and share a peace pipe with Michael. "Your first novel in nine years is coming out this fall. Tell me about it."

"*Into the Stars* is about a young man from America in World War I who gets trapped behind enemy lines and what happens to him. The underlying theme of the book is how destructive war is to all humanity."

"It sounds like a completely different story that what you have written about in the past."

"Well, what saves this young man's humanity is he finds a horse behind enemy lines and they get together in a beautiful way. The story ends in New Mexico."

"Sounds intriguing?"

"It's different from other books in that it is illustrated with 19 beautiful paintings by John Sollie. It will be a coffee table book that is read."

It was time to say good night even though I could have stayed and talked for hours. For Michael Blake, the phenomenal success of the movie *Dances With Wolves* ended more than twenty years of impoverished struggle to make a living out of literature. And for him, the struggle of his crusade to preserve the West continues.

I promised Michael that I would keep the readers of HC informed about the American West Party and about the release of his new book. As I was about to leave, Michael offered up a parting thought.

"I want the world to be looked at as a place to be taken care of for the generations to come. The reason I wrote *Dances With Wolves* is I wanted to portray Indians as people who love, who raise families, and who are human beings."

I couldn't help but wonder how we will be portrayed if we continue to allow the destruction of the wild horses and our heritage that is the American West. They certainly won't be using words like love and human beings.

Books by Michael Blake

Dances With Wolves

The Holy Road – the sequel to *Dances With Wolves*

Airman Mortensen

Marching to Valhalla

Into the Stars

Like a Running Dog Vol. 1

Indian Yell

Twelve the King

Visit Michael's website
www.twelvetheking.com
www.AmericanWestParty.com

Enrich your life and give something back by getting involved with *Zuma's Rescue Ranch* at zumasrescueranch.com