

# Judge pens true story about a race for love

By Kathy Parrish  
staff writer

District Court Judge Keith J. Leenhouts drove a hard bargain when a Dallas producer asked how much he wanted for movie rights to his book "A Father... A Son... and a Three-Mile Run."

"To show you what a poor negotiator I am, if I had the money I'd pay you to do it," answered Leenhouts.

For the Judge, who is nationally known for his Volunteers in Probation (VIP) program, it was enough just to get his true life story on film.

"I always thought it would lend itself best to a movie," explained Leenhouts, who really never expected anyone but his family to see the effort.

THE FILM'S hometown premiere brought out 860 people, who snifled their way through the inspiring story of Bill Leenhouts' struggle to achieve in school and on the track field.

The movie ends with his making Michigan's All State Cross Country Team.

But the real message lies in the support given to their son by Audrey and Keith Leenhouts during his youthful battle.

"It was tough when I was younger and they hung with me," recalled 29-year-old Bill, who now teaches sixth grade and coaches high school cross country.

"They gave me praise when I needed it and the opposite too."

NOW A VISITING Judge in Madison Heights District Court, Leenhouts became nationally famous by enlisting volunteers to work with youthful offenders.

Marking its 25th year in 1984, the Royal Oak-based program has grown to more than a half million volunteers working in 5,000 juvenile and criminal justice programs around the country.

But the Judge's book deals with his relationship with his eldest son, whose grade school years were marked by inability to achieve at academics or sports. Bill's problems were later traced mainly to a paralyzed eye muscle.

But throughout the ordeal, the Leenhouts encouraged their son to do his best. And he plugged away, determined to succeed at whatever he tried.

"My whole being cried out for the world to know how much I loved Bill, how proud I was of him, how defeat had finally changed to triumph, how love had conquered the odds," wrote Leenhouts.

IN 1972, the Royal Oak Kimball High School student took "All-State" honors in the Michigan High School Cross Country Championship.

The Christmas after graduation, Leenhouts presented his 18-year-old son a 40-page manuscript describing their years together. Family and friends urged him to submit it to Reader's Digest, which published the story in 1974 as "Race for Love."

"I find writing is a very good way to express feelings and emotions," explained Leenhouts, who also wrote manuscripts for his two other sons.

"It's all my thoughts, emotions and feelings. Poor Bill can't get blamed for any of it."

"I was pretty taken back with the manuscript. That was neat — just between him and me," said Bill.

"It meant more to me than the book and movie."

THE STORY was expanded into a book and in 1975 published by Zondervan Publishing, which sold 100,000 copies in English and about 15,000 in Dutch, French, Portuguese and Spanish. Royalties from

the paperbacks all go to VIP.

As part of its Family Film Series, Evangelical Films retold the story which singer Pat Boone called a "fantastic spiritual tonic."

Two years in the works, the movie had its national

premiere in September in the Bob Hope Theatre at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

Locally, its first showing was in the First United Methodist Church in Royal Oak — the church in which both father and son grew up.

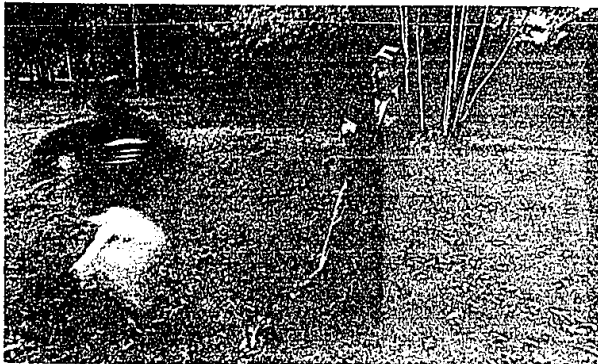
For Bill, admittedly very low key about having a film based on his life, some of the attention has been a bit unnerving. And he definitely has taken a back seat to his author-dad.

But he's glad so many people have responded to his success story.

"I don't comment too much," said the shy teacher, who called the experience "valuer personal and a little bit different."

"But it's helped a lot of people, and I'm pleased about that."

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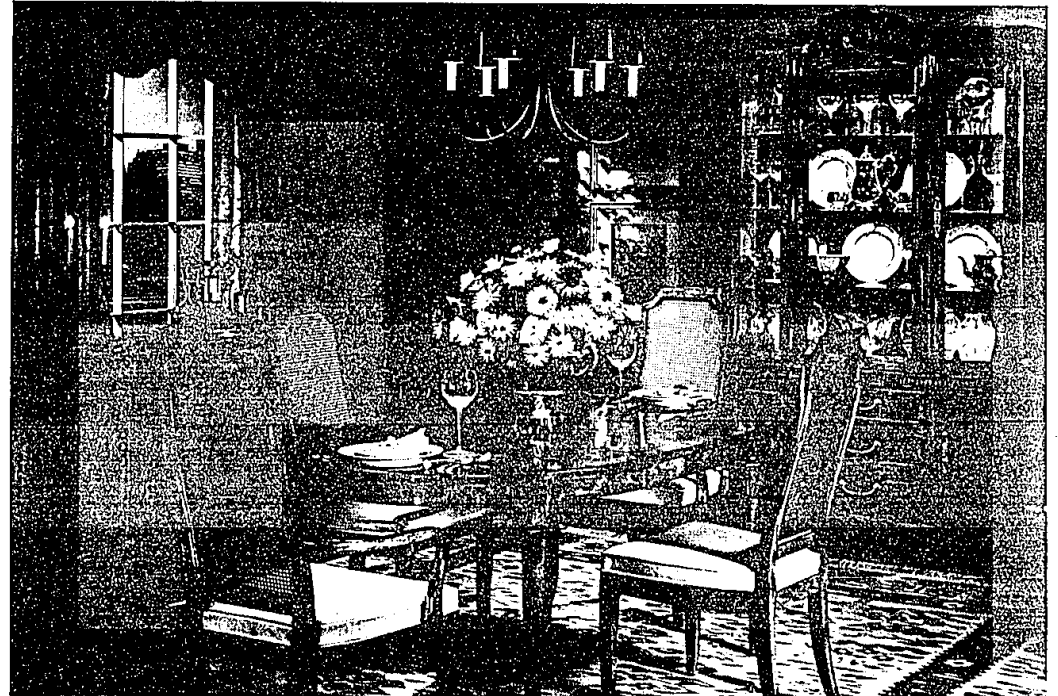
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