

Filmmaker's Banner Day

First she lived it, then she wrote and produced it. Now Gabrielle Berberich's *Greetings From The Shore* arrives on the big screen

by [Eric Levin](#)

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ALL IN: Catch, an old fisherman (Paul Sorvino), betting every dollar he has, puts a stern hand on the shifty yacht club commodore (Jay O. Sanders) in the movie's climactic poker game scene.

Photo by Mike Micken



SEND OFF: Giving Sorvino a fond Jersey "See ya" after his last day on set were, from left, Chwerchak, co-producer Greg Schaefer, actors Lars Arentz-Hansen, Sorvino, Shaw, Ron Geran, Gideon Emery and David Fumero, and Berberich.

Photo by Jurg Rennert

Sitting on the beach in Malibu, tall palms bowing behind her and the blue Pacific rippling before her, Gabrielle Berberich realized there was only one place to shoot her first feature film—the Jersey Shore.

The youngest of six children, she had grown up in Hackettstown and spent family summers in Lavallette, where as a teenager she waited on tables to earn money. After college, she went to Los Angeles and became a casting director, then a writer and producer of small independent films.

With her on the Malibu beach that day was her friend and creative partner, director Greg Chwerchak, a native Jerseyan who had made his name in commercials and music videos and with whom she had collaborated on two short films that had won festival awards.

"I had said to Greg that there had never been a coming-of-age film that represents a coming of age in New Jersey," Berberich says. "We talked about it while sitting on the beach. I've always had this wistfulness for this little barrier island where Lavallette is located. The way we started talking about the film, Lavallette was the first character."

Four years after that powwow on the Pacific, their full-length coming-of-age movie, *Greetings From the Shore*, opens in September in about 25 theaters in New Jersey and on screens in New York City and the Philadelphia area. (For details see greetingsfromtheshorethemovie.com.)

“This is a love story to New Jersey,” says Chwerchak. The tale, which Berberich wrote with Chwerchak based on events in her own life, is set in Lavallette and was filmed entirely on location there, with the cooperation of the Lavallette Yacht Club and the hospitality of the whole town.

It has enough romance, humor, and intrigue to hold its own in any multiplex. It has a terrific ensemble cast, including a marquee name—Tenafly’s Paul Sorvino, who plays a sage old fisherman buffeted by life who looks out for Jenny, the smart and pretty teenage daughter of his deceased friend.

Playing that central role with as much gumption as charm is a radiant newcomer, Kim Shaw, who was 20 and had done only theater work when she arrived on the set in September 2006. As the film opens, the death of Jenny’s father has made it imperative for her to earn as much money as possible to enroll at Columbia University in the fall. She is hired as a waitress at the tony Lavallette Yacht Club, but with a catch—she has to teach a bunch of surly Russian sailors working there as busboys how to speak passable restaurant English, or she’s out.

The sailors refuse to learn, and their ringleader blows smoke in her face and walks out of class. But in the back of the room a hunky, sensitive, dark-haired Romeo has caught Jenny’s eye, and vice versa.

At this point, *Greetings From the Shore* could have gone the way of countless treacly summer love stories. But Berberich and Chwerchak keep upping the ante, figuratively and literally. The story climaxes with a high-stakes poker game on which hang the fates of all the characters. By that point, the filmmakers have complicated the romance between Jenny and Benicio (David Fumero); the “Russian” sailors have taken Jenny into their confidence, revealing why those quotation marks are necessary; and Sorvino, as Catch, the old man of the sea, has stood up to the villainous commodore of the yacht club, played with an irresistible twinkle in his eye by veteran character actor Jay O. Sanders.

Berberich and Chwerchak have pulled off a neat trick: They have made an entertaining film that also presents a master class in character development, ensemble acting, and pinpoint comic relief. (For that, praise Andrew Shaifer’s hilariously stuffy, fastidious, and snarky club manager, Dooley.)

Greetings From the Shore may be the first feature film that does justice to the beautiful light of the Shore, especially at dawn and dusk; that captures the breezes that tousle hair and rattle rigging; that mikes the shore birds that squawk as the tides shift; that shows the rooming houses for the crash pads they are, but reveals Jenny’s meager room to be her sanctuary; and without totally lampooning the rich, notes the chasm between the yachting crowd and the summer workers who serve them.

All of this Berberich observed firsthand growing up. “From the age of 12 or 13, I worked at restaurants in Lavallette, and I was completely fascinated by interacting with people from other countries who were there,” she says. “And often that was the only such exposure I had, because I came from a rural town. These people I met were so outside my experience—except on television.

“I watched an extraordinary amount of television,” she explains. “I wasn’t just interested in the narrative, I was interested in the cast and crew and understanding how it was made. My dad had an amazing sense of humor and so does my mom, so they loved vintage comedies. There was no HBO at that time. But there were movies on PBS. If there was a good movie on at 2 am, I’d come home from school, take a nap, and my mother would wake me at 2 and we’d watch the movie together. Then we’d go back to bed.

“She was very interested in feeding who we were intellectually and culturally. So I give her a lot of credit for exposing me to those things. And I give my father credit for helping me appreciate the subtle things you find in everyday life.”

Berberich’s father, who grew up in Bayonne and Jersey City, was in the printing business. He died of cancer when he was just 51. Five years before that, when she was a freshman at Marymount Manhattan College, the two were crossing Madison Avenue when he was struck by a van going the wrong way on the one-way thoroughfare.

It was a lovely April day, and they were heading, ironically, for the sunny side of the street. “All of a sudden I saw my father, who was the kindest, gentlest man, push this woman into the middle of the street,” Berberich recalls. “The next second the van hit him. He was pushing her out of harm’s way.”

Her father required extensive surgery and rehabilitation to recover from the compound, complex fractures he suffered on the right side of his body. For months he stayed in the city with Gabrielle, who would push him in his wheelchair to and from his rehab sessions.

“When you’re no longer a kid, it’s rare to have this kind of quality time with a parent, just the two of you,” she says. “The fact that I got to see him get better was very special to me. He recovered completely, though he set off metal detectors at airports.”

In her first semester at college, she applied to be a researcher for one of her professors, who was writing a biography of Twilight Zone creator Rod Serling.

Berberich got the job because she had seen every episode of the series and knew more about the show and Serling than any other applicant. Soon she was conducting many of the major interviews. She spoke to producers, writers, directors, and actors. In those days before cell phones, she would wait at her parents’ house for people to return calls. “I remember my father picking up the phone in the kitchen once and calling up to me, ‘It’s Carol Burnett for you.’” The 1992 biography by Gordon F. Sander was later nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

The time that she and her father had spent together made it easier to deal with his early death. That experience, plus her love for Lavallette and her years of waitressing there, began to germinate in her mind. Meanwhile, she became a casting director.

Chwerchak—whose family moved from Nutley to Texas when he was four, but returned every summer to the Jersey Shore—met Berberich when he was casting his first short film, 1998’s *The Hook-Armed Man*. “It was a dark comedy about a disfigured murderer who is also a messianic figure,” Chwerchak says. “We had already seen about 75 actors, and none of them were right. We were desperate.

“Finally, we called in this casting director who was friends with my producer. She read the script. I remember sitting across from this bright-eyed, bushy-tailed girl who totally got the intellectual depth of the screenplay.

Not only that, she said, ‘I’ve got just the right actor for it.’ The guy came in the next day and was perfect. Not only does she have an understanding of text and subtext, but she has a way of translating that into her feel for actors.

“Ever since then we’ve been on the same wavelength. As we were writing *Greetings From the Shore*, she’d have these lightbulbs go off where she’d say, ‘I know who this person is.’ I’d be nervous, but the people she had in mind turned out to be the most central in the film and the ones that add the most authenticity.”

“Casting is the linchpin of what got me wanting to be a filmmaker,” says Berberich. “I’ve always had this Rolodex of characters in my head. A casting person is one of the first ones hired, so you develop a relationship with the producer and the director. The final production starts to percolate in the casting. I love actors and have a deep respect for what they do.” Nowadays, Berberich owns the respected acting center, Michael Howard Studios, in New York City.

The partners have already written a second very different Jersey-based film and would like to complete a trilogy, each shot in a different part of the state. If *Greetings* takes off and goes wide, the second film will be postponed. Since raising money for the new film will be easier if *Greetings* is a hit, that would not be a bad problem to have.