

Chesterfield Mall is the 'every mall,' says documentary crew

By LAURA BROWN

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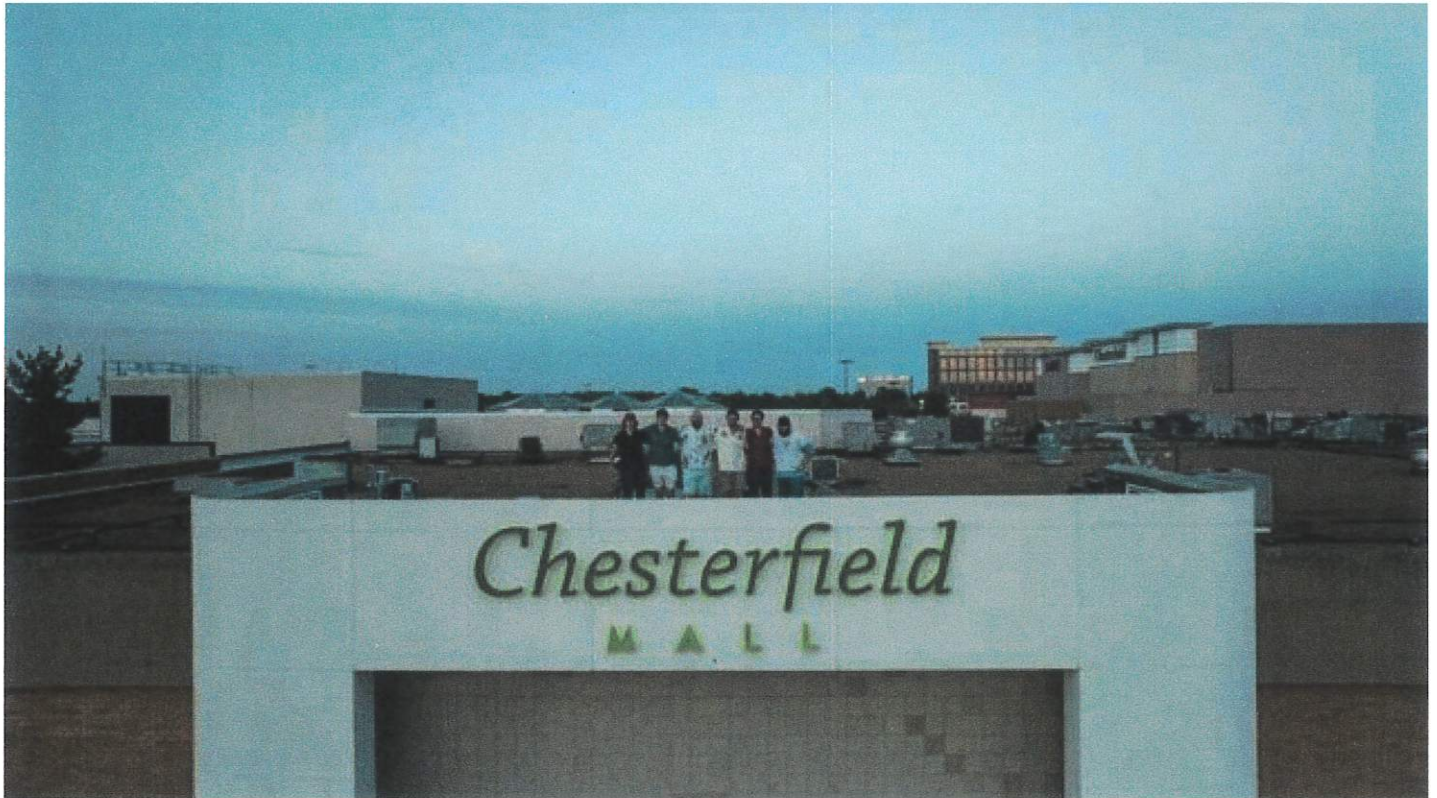
Bright Sun Film's Brennen Evangelista (left) and Bright Sun Film's creator and Chesterfield Mall documentary director Jake Williams (right) posing with the iconic Chesterfield Mall monument sign.

Kickoff of demolition efforts at Chesterfield Mall on Oct. 15 brought back decades-old memories of first dates, shopping trips for high school prom and teenage hang-outs. Since it opened in 1976, the traditional shopping mall was a central gathering place for communities.

But while the mall is a memorable piece of nostalgia for many in the area, its story is one repeated across the U.S.

According to Capital One Shopping, there were as many as 25,000 malls across the country in 1986. Now, it is estimated that there are 1,150, with projections that by 2032, there may be as few as 150 malls in operation.

This trend of shopping malls dying across the U.S. has caught the attention of Bright Sun Films Creator Jake Williams, from Toronto, Canada. Williams is directing his second feature film that will document the rise and fall of shopping malls, using Chesterfield Mall as the example of what he calls the “every mall.”



Bright Sun Films crew on the roof of Chesterfield Mall before its demolition. (Photo: provided)

“There’s no identifiable features really of this mall compared to others,” Williams said. “The carousel was maybe a thing, but if you walked into this, I don’t know if you can really say it’s any different from a mall in Idaho.”

Williams, and Bright Sun Films Producer John Shaw, said they chose to feature Chesterfield Mall in their documentary from a long list of malls slated for demolition across the country.

“We wanted to do something about malls in America since I’ve been fascinated with dead malls and the phenomenon around that and how retail goes through an endless cycle,” Williams said. “It started in the town center. Then it grew into the suburban town center style with indoor retail, and now it’s dying. All these cities across America have these massive buildings that they don’t know what to do with and I’ve been interested to see what happens to them.”



Bright Sun Films creator and film director Jake Williams (left) with camera crew inside Chesterfield Mall. (Photo: provided)

Shaw said visiting Chesterfield Mall before it closed helped them to make the decision to use it as the “every mall” in their documentary. The documentary will dive into the community’s connection with Chesterfield Mall, portraying the mall not just as a

shopping center but as a place between home and work where people spent their time. Many locals, from mall walkers to longtime shoppers, shared their stories with Williams and Shaw about holiday traditions, dates and Saturday afternoons spent with friends.

“Once we got on-site in Chesterfield and started meeting people and filming, we quickly realized that this story here was kind of indicative of malls everywhere in middle America,” Shaw said. “It’s the same concept, the same layout, the same kind of people. Everybody’s hometown mall has the same stores: the Cheesecake Factory, Victoria’s Secret, Sephora and Pottery Barn.”

Williams and Shaw said one unique thing about Chesterfield Mall is that it was used all the way up until the demolition. When Bright Sun began filming, the mall had already seen most of its national retailers leave. They had been replaced by a patchwork of local businesses and unique tenants.

“There were karate classes, a clown school, a church, a museum,” Shaw said. “There were a couple antique malls, a piano store and then the Cheesecake Factory. And there was an Indian restaurant and pickleball, obviously.

“That was the most shocking thing we saw, I think. We just walked in and saw people playing pickleball in the concourse area.”

“We’ve never seen anything like that,” Williams added. “That’s pretty weird.”



Bright Sun Films crew filming inside Chesterfield Mall. (Photo: provided)

Williams said how Chesterfield Mall remained open up until the demolition was in stark contrast to abandoned malls in other parts of the country.

“Just to use a local example, if you look at something like Jamestown Mall (in North St. Louis County), which was a mall that sat there for, I think over a decade, abandoned, and then, when it was demolished, it still hasn’t been put to use,” Williams said. “They’re thinking maybe they’ll put a warehouse there or something. The land there is a lot less valuable than it is here. I think that’s pretty clear.”

The mall’s final chapter will soon conclude. The Staenberg Group plans to transform the site into a high-end development called Downtown Chesterfield. The project is slated for completion in the 2030s, and will feature a walkable community space with retail and residential spaces.

“We’ll finish filming when the building is gone,” Shaw said. “But we’re interested in preserving its legacy; the memories and stories of those who made Chesterfield Mall a part of their lives.”

The documentary will take a year or two to finalize, with plans for a screening in St. Louis once completed sometime in 2026. The crew will need to come back to Chesterfield at least two more times to capture the final demolition of the mall, with the mall scheduled to be completely gone by April, 2025.

The documentary aims to capture the feeling of nostalgia that so many have for the mall.

“Near the end, when the mall was closing, we just kind of sat there as people were coming in and talking to them and getting their stories,” Williams said. “Some stories would be like, ‘when I was 10, I had my first kiss,’ or, ‘I went to prom, and this is where we ate.’ That’s what the story is. It’s about those people.”

Williams and Shaw are asking anyone with photos or videos of the mall they would like to share to email mall@brightsunfilms.co. Williams pointed out that they especially would like media from the early 2000s and older.

“It’s the memories,” Williams said. “You can think of something as innocuous as a mall, it’s just an indoor concourse and a Pottery Barn, but it’s also a lot of people’s favorite memories from their childhood. It was the third place for people. It wasn’t work, it wasn’t home, it was somewhere to go hang out with your friends. The community is losing it. People who shopped here so many Christmases and Boxing Days, that’s it; it’s done. I can understand it’s an emotional thing for people.”

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