

FCHS Grad Editor on TV Series

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A local graduate has a primary role in creating this season's hottest TV show. Aaron Rottinghaus, a 1997 Franklin County High School graduate, is an editor on ABC's "The Good Doctor," which is the No. 1 new drama on TV. Rottinghaus grew up in Brookville and is the son of Dan Rottinghaus and Toni Miles.

"The Good Doctor" is about a young hospital surgeon, Shaun Murphy, who has autism with savant syndrome. He's played by actor Freddie Highmore.

As an editor, Rottinghaus puts together an entire episode of the show. He compares it to getting a box of puzzle pieces. Scenes may have several different versions, with actors changing up the scene or trying out new lines. The script is often shot out of order and with multiple camera angles.

"I get all that footage and piece it together in a way that I think that everyone would like and I go from there," Rottinghaus said. He's also responsible for adding in music and temporary sound effects.

Rottinghaus is one of three editors on the show; they each edit every third episode at an intense pace. He can set his own starting time, so he usually begins around 11 a.m. But he edits for about 12 hours straight, six or seven days a week. That lasts about three weeks before starting over on his next episode. "It's my life when I'm on the show," he said. In January, he'll work on his fifth episode before his sixth and final in February to March.

Rottinghaus is no stranger to working on a popular show; he was an assistant editor on HBO's "Big Love" and Showtime's "The Big C." But working for ABC, one of the three main networks, is a different experience with large audiences and quick schedules. While cable channels like HBO tend to film and edit everything before the season starts, network shows like "The Good Doctor" are writing, shooting and editing during the current season. That's what creates the nonstop pace.

The show offers editors a unique challenge because the main character has autism. People with autism may not make eye contact and may not like to be touched. They may have difficulty understanding jokes or sarcasm, and they may not respond in conversation like people expect them to.

"That takes away a lot of things that you're used to dealing with in terms of editing human behavior," Rottinghaus said. "He's just a character that doesn't do what one would normally do in a conversation."

It can be difficult to find a shot of Highmore's face reacting to something another character did or said. "You don't realize how much you fall back on a look between two people to sell a scene," Rottinghaus said. "And when you take those things away, it becomes a challenge."

He also feels the challenge—and a responsibility—to showcase people with autism in an accurate way. "I want to treat it respectfully, accurately ... not just using it as a storytelling device," he said.

That can be a difficult line to walk. "A lot of what Shawn does is funny. ... You want to find the entertainment and make it funny without making fun of it."

There are medical professionals on the writing staff and on set to help ensure accuracy. Rottinghaus will sometimes call one of the medical writers if he isn't sure about a scene. For example, if Highmore improvises a line, instead of following the script, Rottinghaus may need to ask if that is "neurotypical"—something a person with autism would probably not say or do. "We're constantly having those discussions," he said.

The show is filmed in Vancouver, Canada. Rottinghaus hasn't even been to the set, though he hopes to go sometime. Instead, he works out of an office in Los Angeles, in the same building as the

show's writers. The show will likely see a second season—although it hasn't been announced yet—and Rottinghaus hopes to continue to be a big part of it.

During his off season, from about March to mid-summer, he will focus on his own projects. He wrote a film script last year, and the next step is to “shop it around.” That usually means a friend he collaborates with will try to charm people in the industry to give them money to shoot the movie themselves. “It's like any other small business. It needs investors,” Rottinghaus said.

It's worked before. About seven years ago, Rottinghaus' film “Apart,” which he wrote and directed, debuted at SXSW (South by Southwest) in Austin, Texas. It was also shown at the Indianapolis International Film Festival.

“The Good Doctor” was the No. 1 drama on TV several times this past fall, beating out the very popular “This Is Us.” It also did well for a network TV show that airs at 10 p.m. It was the most-watched TV series in that time slot since “CSI: Miami” in 2006-07. Even if “The Good Doctor” doesn't finish the entire season at No. 1, it will likely be the No. 1 new drama—and a hit no matter how you measure it.

So, how is it to work on such a celebrated show? “It's really great and weird,” Rottinghaus said. “You can never guarantee a hit, so everyone is on pins and needles to have it come out and see how it did. ... [The success] took a lot of pressure off of us.”