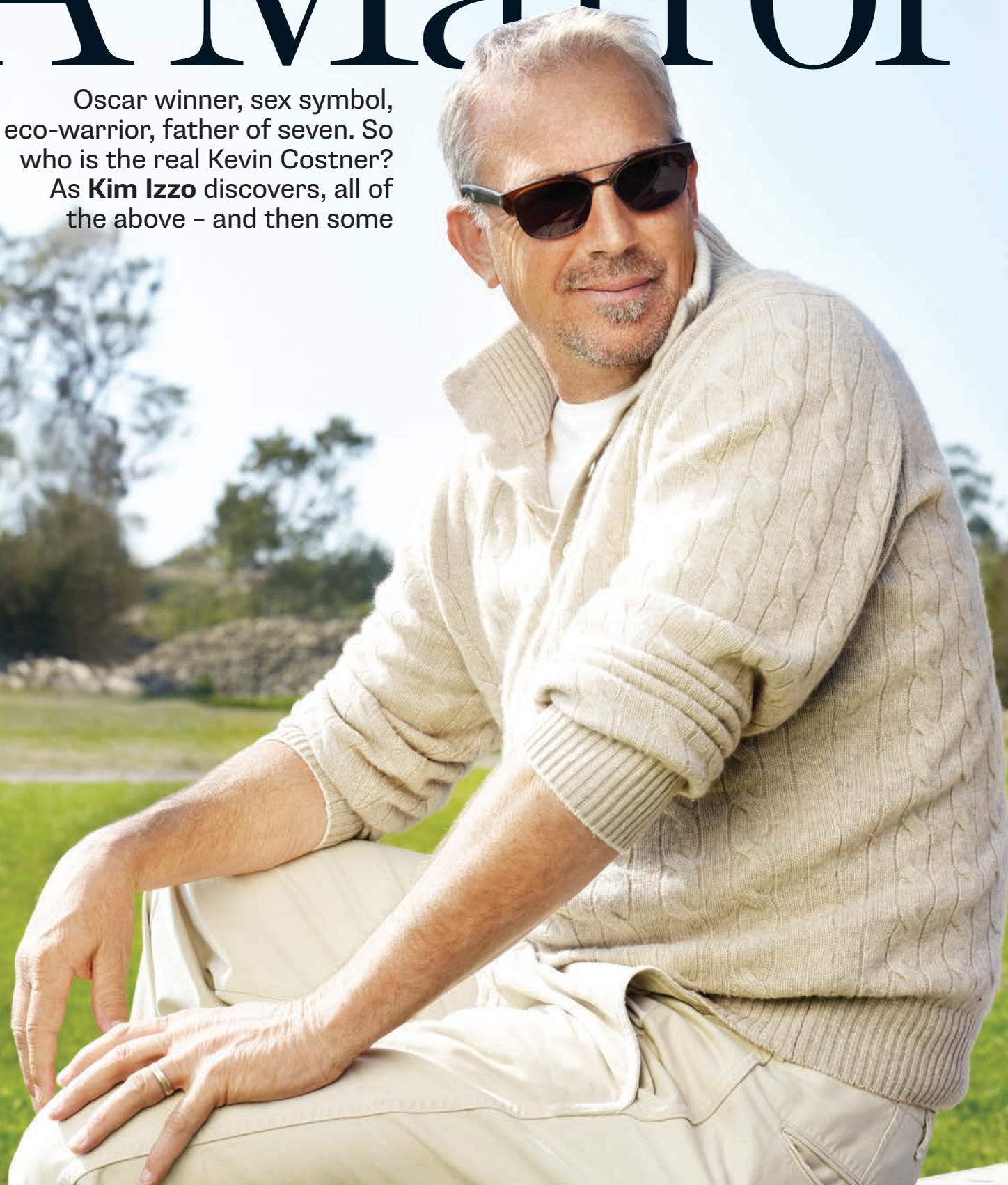


A Man of His Word

Oscar winner, sex symbol, eco-warrior, father of seven. So who is the real Kevin Costner? As **Kim Izzo** discovers, all of the above – and then some



PHOTOGRAPHY, AMANDA FRIEDMAN/TRUNK ARCHIVE

“I take my promises very seriously.”

It’s the sort of line spoken by the leading man, the classically handsome, tall and laconic type who shows up when the chips are down and with eyes that never waver and a voice that resonates, who saves the day. You can easily imagine the likes of mega movie star Kevin Costner speaking such a line and you wouldn’t be wrong. Only Costner wasn’t reading from a script when he said them. Instead, he was explaining to me how he came to invest \$9 million of his own money in one of his latest films, *Black or White*.

“I thought it was powerful and that it had the ability to be commercial even though it wasn’t a terribly expensive movie. It was our money, my partner and I,” he explains on the phone from New York. “What had happened was I had made a promise to the director [Mike Binder who directed Costner in *The Upside of Anger*] that we were going to make it, and so I took it around to all the usual suspects in town, and it was not going to get made, but I had promised him and when I looked in the mirror, the only person who was going to make this was me.”

The film, which bowed at the Toronto International Film Festival last September, is about a white grandfather (Costner) and a black grandmother (Octavia Spencer) battling over the custody of their biracial seven-year-old granddaughter who has been raised her whole life by Costner and his wife, who has just died. The child’s mother, Costner’s daughter, died in childbirth at 17,

and her father, Spencer’s son, is battling drug addiction and has been absent from the girl’s entire life up until now. The plot, as Costner suggests, is intricate and deftly explores racial and class barriers as well as the delicate nature of family ties. “I was startled by how much I was affected by [the script]. Every time I thought the movie was going one way it went another, and I thought that’s really what a movie is supposed to be,” Costner explains. “And I just found the characters and what they were saying really authentic and as a storyteller that’s what you always want. When you’re dealing with where the country is at this point when it comes to race it just seemed even more poignant.”

The performances are stellar, and the film both tugs at the heartstrings – after all, at its core, it’s about the welfare of a little girl – and also provokes dialogue about race. Released Jan. 30, the movie hits the mark, coinciding with recent events in Ferguson, Mo., and New York. The timing is accidental, but it should call attention to the film as it has with *Selma*, also released in January, and perhaps provoke conversations about race and how difficult it is to talk about, even among friends. “I make all kinds of movies – romantic comedies, Westerns, love stories, political thrillers. I mean that’s the thing I’ve actually enjoyed about being able to have my career. I haven’t pigeoned myself,” he says. “So I didn’t make this to be a message movie, but

there is a clear message in this story that I think people can take away.”

Articulate and passionate about his work and the world around him, as Costner speaks he brings to mind certain actors of another generation. Often compared to screen legend Gary Cooper, a lanky and laconic leading man if there ever was one, Costner strikes me more like another Hollywood icon, James Stewart, a man who played characters known for eloquent speeches in films such as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Like Stewart, who in real life was reputed to be one of the good guys, Costner appears to be how you’d imagine him to be. Onscreen he embodies strength of character, confidence and above all human decency, commodities that are increasingly tough to find in our day-to-day lives and in an ever increasingly violent, dangerous and uncertain world. And offscreen too he seems to walk the walk of the all-American good guy.

“The movies taught me how to be heroic. I saw my dad behave that way. But in the movies, I want to be those guys. I want to be those women. When you sit in the dark you go, ‘I hope I’m them.’ And the only way you’re ever going to know is if you get yourself into a tough spot because it’s easy to act that way when things are going well,” he says. “But when you have to plug the boat, when you have to bail it, when you have to make sure that everyone is paid before you’re paid or you’re running for cover or declaring bankruptcy, and that’s not a foul because some people get themselves ▶

into a tough spot, but you have to say, 'Who are you?' And we're not perfect but the idea that you tried more often to do the right thing. And doing the right thing when it's the hardest is the closest measure to who you are."

Despite an inauspicious start as an actor, where he was famously left on the cuttingroom floor of *The Big Chill*, Costner has built his 30-plus-year career playing the archetypal American hero in classic cinematic genres such as Westerns, including *Silverado* and *Hatfields & McCoy's*; sports films *Field of Dreams* and *Draft Day*; romantic leads in the likes of *Message in a Bottle* and *The Bodyguard*; and political thrillers such as *No Way Out* and *3 Days to Kill*. There are more blockbuster hits on his resume, perhaps most notably *The Untouchables* and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, and of course the film he starred, directed and produced to great acclaim, *Dances With Wolves*, which netted Oscars for Best Picture and Directing. Indeed, at one time, there were few stars bigger than Costner.

Fast forward to 2015 in an era where heroism is reserved for comic book superheroes, the idea of a middle-aged white guy in California's Central Valley inspiring a group of Hispanic kids, the sons of migrant workers, to run competitive cross-country and eventually win nine state championships may seem a tad quaint even if it is true. But that is the premise behind *McFarland*, released February 20th.

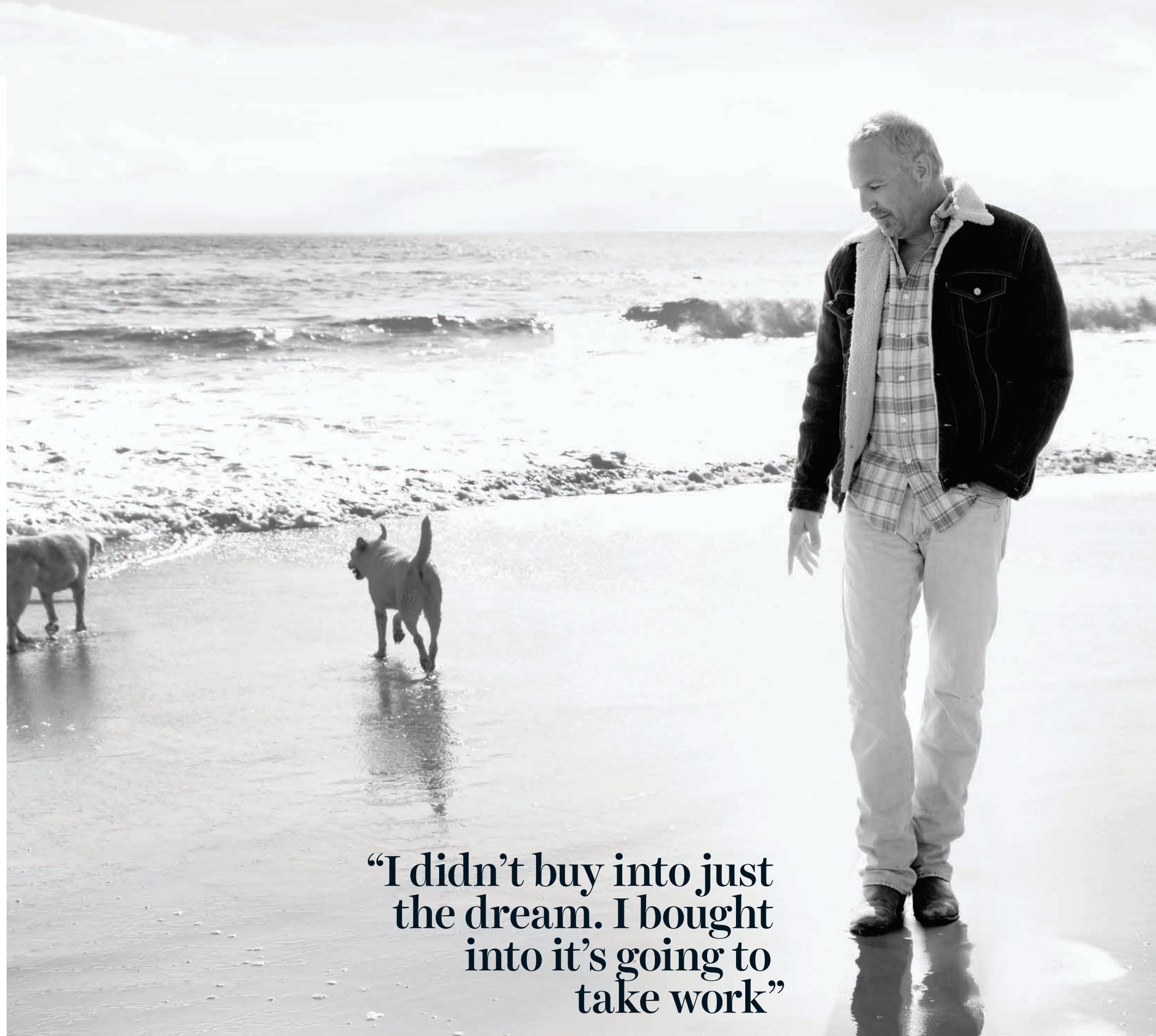
Set in the 1980s, I ask Costner why he chose to portray coach Jim White. "That it was true. You wouldn't want to make that sort of story up. It seems unbelievable," he says. "I just thought that it was remarkable that a man could go in there, not know the language and not know his own place in the world really – and these young kids and the prospects for them aren't nearly as glowing as for other people. And they somehow come together

and find something that they can do and they can be great at, and so great that it translates into these results that are there for everyone to see."

The film's director, Niki Caro, said that when it came to casting the lead it was an easy decision. "Kevin was both mine and the studio's clear choice for Jim White. He has a peerless track record in sports dramas and audiences love him in this kind of role," she explains. "What is so satisfying for me about his performance in this movie is that we see not only Kevin Costner the great actor, but Kevin Costner as a great man. In this movie we see his humanity and his humility."

Working with a cast of young boys, many of whom had never acted before may have been a challenge, but according to director Caro, Costner rose to the occasion. "Kevin was extremely generous with the boys in the movie. The first time he met them at the read-through he told them that what they were about to experience would be something that they would remember for the rest of their lives. He said to them 'When you're my age, you're going to look back on this, your first movie. You'll never forget it. It's a very special time,'" she says. "I was very moved by his care and attention to those kids throughout the shooting process. The bond between them on screen is completely authentic."

COSTNER TURNED 60 on Jan. 18, and on Jan. 15, he was presented with the Critics' Choice Lifetime Achievement Award. He gave an emotional acceptance speech, thanking everyone from the writers to craft service people, proving once more his genuine decency. And on Feb. 2, he was presented with the Movies for Grownups Career Achievement Award given by AARP at its 14th Annual Movies for Grownups Awards. Two Lifetime Achievement awards in a row is ►



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a big deal, so ask him how he feels about being a man of a certain age.

"I have no thoughts about it," he says. "I've enjoyed my life. I really bought into the idea that you could be whatever you wanted to be. My parents told me I could. But they backed up that thought with, 'You're going to have to work for it. You're going to probably fail. And if you fail, you still know you want to do something. Are you going to try to correct or change your behaviour in order to make something happen?' And I bought into that, too. I didn't buy into just the dream. I bought into it's going to take work. I've had good luck in my life and I like the idea of working for it."

But what about the myriad articles and discussions about the dearth of movie roles for women over 40, let alone 60, in Hollywood? Has he found it difficult to find good parts? His answer is an emphatic no. "But I've certainly seen some roles I can't play anymore!" he says and laughs. "It's really amazing that I'm asked to be leads in movies, and I'm 60 years old. I'm really grateful for that. I like to think that that is based on my past. I try to fit myself into movies. I don't try to jam myself into movies."

Costner is also famous in Hollywood for never doing a sequel, despite having had many opportunities to do so. It's a choice that many actors would not have turned down, but for him, it wasn't an option. "I haven't built my career on trying to make the same movie four times, five times. And I'm not saying that's bad. I'm just saying from a business standpoint maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I should have done that, made *Bull Durham 3* and *4*," he explains. "Those are good what you call feather-nests to go back into if, say, your last movie doesn't work on some level, even though you might be really proud of it. Let's say it's *The Postman* [the 1997 post-apocalyptic tale he directed didn't work at the box office]. 'Ooh, boy, I better go and

do *Bodyguard 3* or *4*,' but that's business advice. That's not chasing your heart. That's trying to keep your star bright and making your pile grow bigger. And there's nothing wrong with that, but that's not my way. I know how to do that, but it doesn't feel heroic," he laughs. He plans to direct another Western (it will be the first time sitting in the director's chair since *The Postman*), telling me, "I'd like to get on a horse again."

Not surprisingly, Costner is a man of many passions – another of which is music. He is the lead singer and plays guitar with his country/rock band, Kevin Costner & Modern West, playing and touring the world (including Canada) since 2007 and they recorded their first album *Untold Truths* in 2008. "Music is a professional venture. It's just not something I go out and promote," he says. "I didn't know it would turn into something as big as it's turned into. We could probably play 200 or 300 times a year. We're asked to play that much, but I play 35 times a year maybe, and that's a lot."

His biggest priority, however, is his family. He has seven children ranging in age from 30 to four. The three eldest – Annie, Lily and Joe – are from his first marriage to college sweetheart Cindy Silva. Then came another son, Liam, with ex-girlfriend Bridget Rooney. The youngest three are with his wife of 10 years, Christine Baumgartner, and include two sons, Cayden and Hayes, and a daughter named Grace. I ask him if it is difficult balancing work with family.

"I don't have to balance. They are the most important," he says. "But as a provider, I have to go to work. My great joy is them." He pauses a moment, then laughs. "My [youngest] daughter wants to do ballet, but she's more interested in buying all the dresses. She's four, and I say, 'You have to dance, too,' but she's more in love with the dresses and she has, like, six dresses now. So I'm like,

'When is she going to start dancing?' So I have the confusion every man has with his daughters, all of them."

His eldest daughter, Annie, 30, works with him at his oil and water business, while daughter Lily, 28, is a singer-songwriter and performs a song onscreen in the funeral scene in *Black or White*. She was also his date on the red carpet in Rome where the film was screened.

"FOR ME, life is a collaboration, and you have to lead with a vision," Costner tells me. That sort of thinking goes a long way on a movie set whether you're the lead or the director or both. But it's a philosophy that has been put to good use at Water Planet Engineering, a company whose high-tech machinery helped clean up the ecological disaster that was the Deepwater Horizon oil spill off the coast of Louisiana in 2010. Costner has always advocated for the environment, even making it the subject of his 1995 film *Waterworld*. In order to make his passion for clean water a reality, he has surrounded himself with top scientific minds in the field.

"I'm kind of the economic engine to say, 'Why can't we fix this?'" he says. "So I have to get really smart people because I can't. I don't know how. But I do know how to support people and I know how to go after my dreams and, if I'm not smart enough to do them, then I'll go get people who are."

The company has been doing work all over the world, and we may hear about them closer to home. "We've been to the Alberta tar sands and will eventually be doing work in Canada," Costner says. "It's our business to figure out how to deal with water in a more effective, smart and conservative way, and that's my promise."

And we know that when Kevin Costner makes a promise, he intends to keep it. ☐

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