

Movie gives Mickey new outlook

By CLAUDIA FELDMAN
Houston Chronicle

IT TOOK THE producer of *Aurora Encounter* a year to summon the courage to ask Mickey Hays' mother if her boy could be in the movies.

"How do you walk up to a lady and say, 'Your son looks like he's from outer space, and I want him to be in my movie?' " mom

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Candy Wilkerson asked. "He (producer Jim McCollough) told me he had seen Mickey in the papers and thought he would be just perfect as the little alien."

Mickey has received press attention because he has a rare aging disease called progeria. At 13, he is bald, weighs 35 pounds, stands 3 feet 9½ inches tall, and has the heart, the arthritis, sometimes even the disposition, of an old man.

When McCollough finally did contact Mickey, who then lived in Hallsville in North-east Texas, it was accidental, Wilkerson said. "Mr. McCollough told us he was driving down the interstate and saw the sign to Hallsville and stopped at the Dairy Queen. He told me on the phone, 'Please don't think I'm crazy.'"

That first meeting was in 1984. Wilkerson

was calm. She said McCollough was a nervous wreck. She told him she'd talk to Mickey, who was due home from middle school in a few minutes. It didn't take the boy long to come up with an answer.

"I was really for it," Mickey said from his new home in Longview. "I think the producer was a little nervous when he came to my house because he thought I would say no. But really, it's the best thing that's happened in my life."

Mickey tells reporters he was chosen for the part because he is "small and bright."

Wilkerson added that he is a clown and a natural actor, "but then, I would say that as his mother."

Wilkerson doesn't evade questions about exploitation. She is so used to being told that she is exploiting her son — that she is making money on him — that those questions barely bother her anymore.

"I spent a lot of Mickey's life worrying about that before I let anyone do an article on him," she said. "But then I let a reporter do that first one, and I could see it changed his life. I believe he's alive today because of it."

"Before all the publicity, Mickey acted like he wanted to crawl into a hole and wait to die," she said. "Now he's a different person. He used to sit around thinking about how ugly he was and how people made fun of him. Now he goes out into the world and says, 'I'm a movie

star.' To see the change is a wonderful, wonderful thing."

Mickey attended the movie premiere in Houston Thursday and the Longview premiere Friday.

At both premieres, he wore a tuxedo and a top hat and rubbed elbows with co-stars such as Dottie West and Jack Elam.

"People treated me very special, very nice, first class," Mickey said, still euphoric. "I got interviewed, oh yeah, and oh God, I bet I signed 500 autographs."

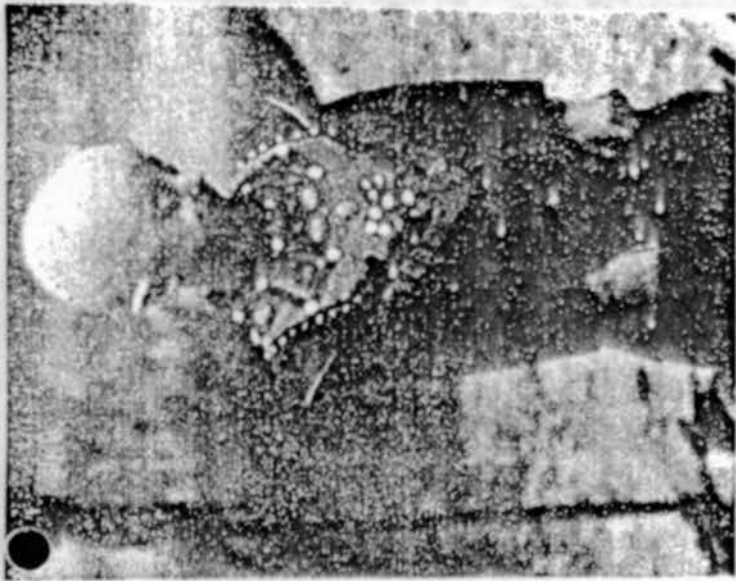
If Mickey is worried about a letdown after the openings, he doesn't let on.

"I'm feeling great," he said. "I've got no aches, no pains, none. I've got a new girlfriend, her name is Karas, and I even have two new stepbrothers and a stepmother."

A week ago Mickey's mom married Larry Wilkerson, with Heritage Business Machines in Longview. They dated for 3½ years, with the dubious mother saying most of those years that she would never remarry. She wanted to devote her life to Mickey, she said.

What she didn't say, or said only rarely, was that she was in constant fear of losing Mickey. But in the past few years, he's put on a few pounds. He's grown a few inches. And he really likes his new stepfather.

Wilkerson laughed like a bride. "Larry wanted to get married, and Mickey wanted us to get married, and so finally I said, 'OK, let's get married.' We really do have fun."



Mickey Hays portrays an alien in the film *Aurora Encounter*.