'Breaking Bad' actor focuses on disability awareness during talk at MU

By Ashley Jost

Thursday, February 19, 2015 at 2:00 pm

Before he spoke at the Missouri Theatre on Wednesday night, actor RJ Mitte had no plans of bringing up “Breaking Bad.” He said he might mention the hit show, but nothing more.

Mitte played Walter “Flynn” White Jr. in the renowned television series, which ended its five-season run in 2013. He has a mild form of cerebral palsy—a neurological disorder that can cause problems with body movement, communication, sensation and depth perception—which is one of his main focuses when speaking to groups.

Mitte said he constantly looks for ways to merge the acting, producing and possibly directing realms of his life with his advocacy work against bullying and to promote awareness of people with disabilities. But he does not necessarily have a goal in merging those aspects of his life.

“I have some goals, but the thing is, it’s not always up to you,” Mitte said.

Given the student-heavy crowd, Mitte said he wanted audience members to hear his thoughts about realizing their own potential, pursuing their passions and making an impact on the world. His life experience validates those three issues, he said, not his time on “Breaking Bad.”

“It’s not really a ‘who’s this 22-year-old talking about this who knows nothing about this?’ thing; this is my life,” Mitte said, addressing whether he had concerns about his messages resonating with the audience. “I don’t know how many people are going to be here tonight, but if one person takes something away, that’s a success.”

During his speech, Mitte recalled spending about seven months of every year for close to a decade of his childhood wearing casts on his legs to strengthen them—muscle weakness is an effect of cerebral palsy.

To get relief from the heat—he grew up in the South, moving from Texas to Louisiana and several other states—Mitte would freeze coins and drop them into his casts. He said it was a good idea until he had two casts filled with loose change.
“They take off the casts, and $6 worth of change comes falling all over the place,” he said. He made light of his disability several times but stressed that it is, in many ways, part of his identity. “Without my disability, I wouldn’t have gotten ‘Breaking Bad.’ I would be another kid in” Los Angeles.

He expected the conversation to shift to “Breaking Bad” when the audience had a chance to ask questions, and it did. Some fans of the show were surprised they didn’t hear any “Breaking Bad” talk until the question-and-answer session.

“I was surprised, but it was really interesting to see he’s not just taking this show to town and making it the only thing he ever does,” MU student Alex Dostaler said. Dostaler said Mitte’s message about seeing his disability as a strength rather than a weakness was inspiring.

In addition to speaking engagements, Mitte works with PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center to talk about bystander awareness of bullying behavior and is a spokesperson for Inclusion in the Arts and Media of People with Disabilities, a group focused on employment of artists with disabilities.

theymaneater

‘Breaking Bad’ star talks disability, fame

RJ Mitte spoke Wednesday night in Missouri Theater.

Some crowd members came because they were fans of “Breaking Bad” or “Switched at Birth.” Some were aspiring journalists. And some were there because they shared a common trait with the speaker.

“I don’t know who he is,” said John Kruse, a Columbia resident with a learning disability. “I like listening to those with disabilities because I have one too.”

Actor RJ Mitte spoke at the Missouri Theatre on Wednesday night at the MU event “Celebrate Ability.”

The venue was prepared to accommodate, with reserved seats for the disabled near the front and two sign language interpreters. The speech was projected in real time behind the podium.

After a brief introduction, Mitte began talking about his upbringing and cerebral palsy diagnosis. The condition was not recognized until Mitte was 3, when a car dealer asked Mitte’s grandmother if he had it.
The dealer was a Shriner. Shriners International is an organization which has several children’s hospitals across the nation. Soon after this encounter, Mitte began treatment at the Shriners Hospital for Children in Shreveport, Louisiana.

“Without Shriners, I wouldn’t be here,” Mitte said.

Now, Mitte gives back by working as a Love to the rescue Ambassador for Shriners Hospitals.

Mitte’s acting career began after his family was approached by an agent at a waterpark. The agent wanted his younger sister to come to Los Angeles and audition for a part. The whole family moved from Texas to California.

Mitte said this career picked him. The agent asked him if he wanted to give acting a try, so he did.

“If you want to get into acting, find your local background or extra work chapter,” Mitte said. “It gave me that opportunity to learn and to grow because when I landed Breaking Bad, it was my first time ever being a lead character, so it was a little nerve wracking, but I was able to utilize everything I learned and saw… Not many people get that opportunity… I have seen the best and worst in people. It taught me lessons and it taught me what I needed to do and what I needed to do was to set an example.”

Mitte also addressed fame and social media.

“Who is on social media? Don’t even raise your hand, it’s pointless,” Mitte said. “Today, more than ever, people are watching. It’s not just me, it’s you as well. People see you for who you are.”

He said that people have access to each other, and everyone’s reach expands globally.

“You need to be careful of what you put out there, especially online, because it defines you, even if it’s not real,” Mitte said. “Your internet fingerprints will one day be your future resumes. You have to protect who you are and what you stand for.”

At the end of his speech, some members of the audience lined up to ask questions. One member asked what his favorite scene in “Breaking Bad” was.

“I enjoyed tackling Bryan [Cranston],” Mitte said. “I like emotional scenes. I have an affinity for tears. I enjoyed the level we had to get to. It stretches that muscle. It’s like therapy. Not a lot of actors get that opportunity.”
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

MU law professor highlights 'serious problems' in Missouri death penalty process
Thursday, February 19, 2015 | 10:38 p.m. CST; updated 7:34 a.m. CST, Friday, February 20, 2015
BY GEOFF WEST

COLUMBIA — Two bipartisan state bills focusing on death penalty reform — Senate Bill 393 and House Bill 561 — have more to do with fixing "serious problems" affecting the entire Missouri criminal justice system and less to do with the morality of executions, MU law professor Paul Litton said Thursday.

Litton was co-chair of an eight-member team of prominent Missouri jurists tasked by the American Bar Association with studying potential flaws in the fairness and accuracy of the state’s capital justice system. The group’s two-year, 400-plus-page report was released in 2012.

Litton highlighted some of the report’s recommendations at a meeting hosted by opponents of the death penalty at the Missouri United Methodist Church. The event, "Moratorium Now: Promoting Reforms for Greater Fairness and Accuracy in Missouri's Death Penalty" drew about 40 people.

Recommendations included changes to the state's investigative procedures, where the most serious problems were found, he said.

Other recommendations aimed at reducing wrongful convictions would require police departments to: record an entire interrogation with a suspect from beginning to end; inform eyewitnesses reviewing a police lineup that a suspect may not be in the lineup; and ensure the police officer leading the lineup doesn’t know who the suspect is in order not to influence the results.

"These are relevant to the whole criminal justice system, not just death penalty cases," Litton said.

At Thursday’s event, state Rep. Stephen Webber, D-Columbia, said he has long supported reform in the state’s capital punishment practices.
"Every single person I've ever met believes government makes mistakes," Webber said, adding that the death penalty is something where "you can't make a mistake."

Both SB 393 and HB 561 would create a task force to analyze the state's capital punishment system, while placing a moratorium on the death penalty until January 2018. The bipartisan Senate bill is sponsored by Sens. Jill Schupp, D-Creve Coeur, and Rob Schaaf, R-St. Joseph; HB 561 was sponsored by Rep. John Rizzo, D-Kansas City, and cosponsored by 11 members including three Republicans.

Missouri has executed 81 people since 1976, including 10 last year, which tied it with Texas for the state with most executions.

The positive outcomes of civilian oversight of police

By Steve Alexander and Betty Wilson

Steve Alexander is professor and co-director of graduate studies in the Division of Biological Sciences at University of Missouri-Columbia. Betty Wilson is an attorney in Columbia.

We are two of the founding members of the Columbia, Mo., Citizens Police Review Board, and we encourage the adoption of a similar civilian oversight board in St. Louis. The Columbia CPRB has been very positive for both the citizens and police in our city.

The initial suggestion to form the CPRB over seven years ago was controversial. Both citizens and police were skeptical. Our City Council empaneled a board to examine the question and after two years of fact finding from all interested parties, they recommended the establishment of the CPRB. The City Council then enacted the enabling ordinance in summer 2009. Sixty people applied for eight positions on the CPRB, and eight were chosen by the City Council after careful screening and interviewing. The Columbia Human Rights Commission assigned a ninth member. The board held its first meeting in November 2009.

The ordinance establishing the board gave it limited oversight authority. The police continued to investigate and make the primary decision on reports of police misconduct. Both citizens and police could appeal the decision to the CPRB. The job of the CPRB was four-fold.

First, the board reviews appeals of cases of misconduct where either the citizen or officer disagrees with the result of the primary police investigation and makes recommendations to the police chief. Second, the board
was tasked with making policy recommendations to the police and the City Council. Third, the board was to develop a mediation program. Fourth, the board was to develop a robust outreach program to increase goodwill and understanding between the police and the citizens of Columbia.

The Columbia, Mo., CPRB has now been in existence for over five years. Although initially there was some questioning on the part of both citizens and police, the board is now an established and respected part of the community. A key element of this success is that the board has remained independent of the Columbia Police Department while always having professional and respectful interactions with them. It is impossible to imagine Columbia moving forward without the CPRB.

The Columbia CPRB accomplished a lot during its first five years. The board reviewed 25 appeals, and the decisions are on the city’s website. Two police department policy changes resulted from the appeals. Dozens of outreach activities were held for both the public and the police. The board meets with all new police recruits to explain the function of the board. A mediation program was developed that should provide increased transparency and good will between citizens and police.

The Columbia CPRB held a meeting for regional cities interested in having their own review boards, and they sent members to the past five National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement meetings. It was because of one of these meetings three years ago that the board learned more about individual body cameras and suggested to our chief that he expand their limited use in Columbia. Indeed the department announced recently that they are obtaining them for every officer.

Every community would benefit from a Citizens Police Review Board. Once established, it is non-threatening. It provides transparency and some additional accountability without interfering with the police doing their important work. The ultimate success of any Police Review Board is its members. They need to be dedicated to fairness. The board needs to be a balanced group that reflects the makeup of the community, and whose members are carefully vetted to ensure fairness.

We urge St. Louis to adopt a Citizens Police Review Board and urge the citizens of St. Louis to step up and volunteer for the board. We also urge the citizens and police of St. Louis to take advantage of the board and let their concerns be known. A Citizens Police Review Board will make St. Louis an even better place.

**The Kansas City Star.**

Dorial Green-Beckham regrets way his tenure at Missouri ended, will meet with Chiefs
INDIANAPOLIS - A crowd quickly gathered around the stage as Dorial Green-Beckham hopped up a few stairs Thursday at the NFL Combine.

Green-Beckham, 21, was speaking to reporters for the first time in nearly one year, a period in which he was accused of violence against women, dismissed from the Missouri football team and enrolled at Oklahoma, where he didn’t play last fall because of NCAA transfer rules. That, and being a 6-foot-5, 237-pound wide receiver with a massive catch radius and impressive athleticism, tends to invite interest — and scrutiny.

“It’s very tough for me,” Green-Beckham said when asked about his past. “It’s tough for me, standing up here and be able to speak in front of all you guys because I have not spoken in the past year.”

It was also tough, Green-Beckham said, to sit out last season after a breakout sophomore campaign at Missouri in which he caught 59 passes for 883 yards and 12 touchdowns.

“I’m disappointed in myself for the mistakes I (made) at Missouri,” Green-Beckham said. “I wish I could have still finished out there, still been a home(-state) guy, stayed in Missouri. I regret all the mistakes I’ve done. …

“I want to come in and stay on track and focus on one thing only, and that’s competing here at the combine. Just going in and being the best I can be and letting everybody know what I came here to do.”

Green-Beckham’s goal is to convince NFL teams — including the Chiefs, who hold the 18th pick in the draft — they should invest a high draft pick in him, despite increased scrutiny around the league regarding domestic violence.

“Physically, we think he has all the gifts in the world,” Chiefs general manager John Dorsey said Thursday. “We’ve all admired him, all of us who have been in the state of Missouri and Kansas City area have seen him from afar and admired his physical traits.
I think now what people want to do is kind of get a feel for him as a person and see where he is.

“We’ll be meeting him in the next couple days, and I look forward to it.”

Green-Beckham, who’s from Springfield, Mo., was dismissed from the MU football team last spring after he allegedly forced his way into an apartment and allegedly pushed one of the female residents down a flight of stairs while looking for his girlfriend. He was not arrested by Columbia Police because the alleged victims declined prosecution.

“All the decisions I made, I wish I could take it back,” said Green-Beckham, who added he wouldn’t go into detail about his mistakes. “What’s happened has happened. I was young, I made mistakes. I understand that. …

“I’m just trying to focus on one thing; being a better person and a better teammate and a better person off the field.”

Green-Beckham repeated phrases like “looking forward” and words like “maturing” often. It was a message he will surely repeat to NFL teams this week as he tries to explain his past, which also includes two marijuana arrests.

In October 2012, Green-Beckham and three teammates were arrested in a parking lot near Memorial Stadium in Columbia for misdemeanor possession of fewer than 35 grams of marijuana. All four later pleaded guilty to second-degree trespassing.

In January 2014, Green-Beckham was arrested for alleged possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute, a felony. He was riding in a car that was stopped for an expired tag in Springfield, and a search of the vehicle turned up nearly one pound of suspected marijuana.

Another passenger in the car said the marijuana was his, and charges were never filed against Green-Beckham.

NFL Network draft analyst Mike Mayock, who has Green-Beckham as his fourth-best receiver in this draft class, said the talent might be worth the risk, even though he remains raw as a prospect, too.
“What happens sometimes is the ability and talent of the athlete overwhelms the other analysis, and that’s where we make a lot of mistakes,” Mayock said. “You go, wow, remember someone fell, right? Give you an example.

“Wide receiver Green-Beckham this year is going to be a polarizing conversation. I go back to several years ago and Dez Bryant couldn’t do his Pro Day at Oklahoma State because they wouldn’t allow it. I was at his Pro Day at his high school.

“(Justin) Blackmon was the fifth pick in the draft. The kid, (Josh Gordon) from Cleveland, second-round supplemental pick. All three of those guys (were) gifted, gifted wide receivers with significant off-the-field issues. One of the three has turned out, Dez Bryant. That is probably about the right ratio.”

After leaving Missouri, Green-Beckham landed at Oklahoma, where he worked out but couldn’t appear in games. Oklahoma tried to get a waiver from the NCAA to allow Green-Beckham, Rivals’ No. 1 recruit in the Class of 2012, to play right away.

“The opportunity was there, everything just didn’t fall in the right hands,” Green-Beckham said. “It wasn’t anything I could just sit on and be angry or upset about. I had to just focus on the things I needed to focus on.”

No off-field incidents have come to light since he arrived at Oklahoma, and he says he was determined to be a good teammate, which he hopes NFL teams notice.

“Showing them what I’ve done the last year, my Oklahoma time ... how much maturing I’ve done,” Green-Beckham said. “(I’ve) grown up from this and taken advantage of it and not looked back.”

Still, rather than staying in school another season — a move he conceded could have made his draft stock “a lot higher” next year — Green-Beckham decided to come out for the draft.

“Yes, I do feel like those mistakes have put me back (in the eyes of teams),” Green-Beckham said. “I’m just trying to look forward. ...
“(I was) maturing, spending my time with the coaches and the players, (spending) more hours in study hall. Doing all that stuff makes me a better person.”

Now, Green-Beckham has to convince teams — including the Chiefs — this is truly the case.

“The past few months have been real tough for me,” he said. “Missing the whole season, missing playing with my teammates, missing football, period ... looking from the outside in, seeing things that I’ve never seen before, I just want to take advantage ... 

“I know what’s at stake. I know what type of person I am, and I understand (what teams are) looking for from me as a person. I just want them to know I’m gonna go out there and give my all, show everybody what I’m capable of doing and just focus on being the best player I can be.”