

# LOCAL

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## Former Bloomington politico makes splash with film



**MIKE LEONARD**  
Hoosier Times

The shouting television host named Chris Matthews may have appropriated the term "Hardball" for his television talk show, but former Bloomingtonian Chris Sautter probably knows as much about high-stakes politics as anyone.

It was Sautter who led 8th District Congressman Frank McCloskey's recount team through the minefields of the bitter recount process that ultimately resulted in the Bloomington Democrat's election by the U.S. House of Representatives in 1984.

Today Sautter is a Washington, D.C., political consultant and recount specialist. Whenever there is a recount looming, in any jurisdiction in the U.S., Democrats are likely to have Sautter on the ground quicker than an EMT to a car crash site.

The affable former Legal Services Organization attorney knows rough-and-tumble politics. He grew up, after all, in the Chicago suburbs during the long reign of Mayor Richard Daley.

It was, in fact, the Daley legacy that inspired Sautter to undertake an unusual endeavor in 1999 — filming for a documentary on the nationally obscure subject of the East Chicago Democratic mayoral primary.

"East Chicago has always been notorious for hardball politics," Sautter said last week from Los Angeles, where his recently completed work, *The King of Steeltown*, was screened at the West Coast presentation of the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival.

"It's really a throwback to the era of the first Mayor Daley in Chicago," Sautter said. "It's kind of like coming across a primitive culture in the South Pacific islands. There aren't too many places left where hardball politics are still practiced like this."

Though Mayor Robert A. Pastrick has held court over East Chicago for more than three decades, he faced what looked to be a formidable challenge in 1999 from Stephen Stiglich, who wrested control of the Lake County party chairmanship from Pastrick in 1997.

"Being Lake County, the Democratic primary is the real election," Sautter explained. "This looked to be like Ali-Frazier, two very tough guys going at it."

Sautter and his small film crew descended on East Chicago for the last 10 days before the primary, filming rallies, people on the street and strategy sessions.

He got some good stuff.

"There is a very contentious dispute, ironically, over absentee ballots, with allegations of vote-buying and so forth," the rookie filmmaker explained. "The documentary takes a really pretty much a cinema vérité approach. There's not a lot of narration. The action pretty well speaks for itself."

*The King of Steeltown* is pretty much a new commodity on the film festival circuit, but if its reception in Los Angeles is any indication, the documentary will gain some attention. *LA Weekly*, which is notoriously tough on new work, previewed the New York film festival by singling out Sautter's film.

It called the documentary a "definite standout" and said, "Sautter has a finely honed feel for the fading machinery of old-school party politics. It's just the sort of odd surprise that is the best one can hope for from this sort of lineup."

Sautter hopes for bigger and better notice, having been told that even the holy grail of independent filmmakers — the Sundance Film Festival — is a real possibility.

At 75 minutes, *The King of Steeltown* is longer than the standard PBS documentary. "They want 56 minutes and 40 seconds," Sautter explained. "At this point, I'm not willing to cut that much. But we'll see."

Compromises are inevitable in the film business, as Sautter already knows. "At least," he said, "the one good thing about doing your own film is you get to decide your own music. So, being a blues enthusiast, I had a ball. I got stuff in from my old friend, (the late Indianapolis blues mandolinist) Yank Rachell, Sleepy John Estes, Slim Harpo and Paul Butterfield.

"And it's not just that it's stuff I like. I think it's appropriate to use that good ol' Chicago blues in telling this story in East Chicago."

No Bloomington screening of the documentary has been scheduled, but Sautter said it's very likely he'll take advantage of the opportunity to return to town when he can arrange it.

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