

# The Salt Lake Tribune

How does a ‘dumpy cubicle-dweller’ from Utah get to meet so many famous people at Sundance every year?

*Stuart Graves is king of the Sundance celebrity selfie.*



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Stuart Graves has gotten friendly with more celebrities than you ever will.

He’s got proof plastered all over his Facebook and Instagram accounts.

There he is with Molly Shannon, Elijah Wood, Jack Black and John Legend.

With Katie Couric, Laura Dern, Jon Hamm and Kevin Bacon.

With Josh Groban, Woody Harrelson, Elisabeth Moss and Octavia Spencer.

(Courtesy Stuart Graves) Stuart Graves with Molly Shannon.

While the Sundance Film Festival brings a gaggle of big-name folks and industry types to Park City every year, Graves drives up the mountain not for the movies they're promoting, but for the chance to meet someone famous, even if only for the 10 seconds it takes to snap a selfie with them.

When he spots his celebri-prey, he'll approach — always being polite, always being nice — and ask for a photo.

"I'm a natural smiler, so that's part of it," Graves says. "I don't just run up and stick my camera in their face, I always ask if I can get a photo and I always thank them. I try not to approach them from the side or back, I try to let them see me coming."

If they say yes, he'll whip out his bulky, beat-up Canon with the taped-up battery compartment, point the lens at himself and whoever his famous friend is, click the shutter and hope he's captured something.

Even though his camera has a swivel screen so he can frame the shot right, Graves doesn't use it. He also doesn't own a smartphone.

"This year I'm actually going to use the screen and turn it around," he vows. "It makes a fun icebreaker with the celebrity. They'll say things like, 'Can I get an old-school selfie?'"

His system isn't perfect. He's had his share of blurred shots and technical glitches. Last year, he tried to get a photo with Chelsea Handler, but his battery died. So he improvised.

"I faked it because I was the only one she stopped for. I didn't get the picture, but I wasn't going to tell Chelsea to wait!"

He got a little too nervous the time he met James Marsden.

“His eyes are so amazing that I’d forgotten to take the lens cap off, because inside I was screaming like a teenage girl! Luckily he told me and I got the picture.”

Graves used to go to Park City every Sundance season for the party atmosphere, but a few years ago when he bumped into Elijah Wood, his priorities changed.

(Courtesy Stuart Graves) Stuart Graves with Elijah Wood.

“I’m a huge ‘Lord of the Rings’ fan and I got a picture of me with him, and that was the beginning,” says Graves. “I started thinking, ‘Oh my gosh — who else?’”

He takes time off from his Salt Lake County job for Sundance every year. When the film slate (and the celebrities starring in them) is announced, the strategizing and wish-list-making begin.

Graves’ routine is to go only the first weekend, when the famous are more likely to be out in public promoting their new films and popping in at premiere screenings. He’ll hang on Main Street from about 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. and walk away with around 10 selfies each day.

To find celebrities, he’ll watch where the paparazzi go. He’ll stop by the Variety and Hollywood Reporter lounges because stars will likely be doing press there. He’ll hang out by the Marriott hotel on the northern end of Main, which Graves says is a good

area to see famous people “walking unencumbered, and you might get a little extra time because they’re not so stressed. It’s kind of fun just to see what happens.”

He also relies on a sort of celebrity sixth sense that enables him to find famous people even when they’re bundled up in winter gear, an easy way for them to walk around incognito. Last year he was able to pick out a nearly unrecognizable Jon Hamm.

(Courtesy Stuart Graves) Stuart Graves with Jon Hamm.

“Nobody saw him,” Graves says. “I looked at him really carefully to make sure, so I just quietly asked him for a photo. I don’t think he was thrilled. He was standing all by himself waiting to cross the street.”

Sometimes Graves’ celeb-spotting instincts fail him. A few years back, he was casually conversing with a woman about the weather when paparazzi spotted her and she was whisked away. It was Zoe Saldana, who only starred in “Avatar,” the biggest box-office smash of all time.

“I asked somebody who that was and they told me,” Graves regretfully says. “I kind of forgot myself for a little bit there.”

Ewen McGregor warned him about getting hit by a car when he was trying to snap a photo. Graves told him, “That’s OK, it’ll be worth it!”

Kevin Bacon and Kathryn Hahn were doing an “Access Hollywood” interview and Graves was able to chat up both of them. “Kathryn was getting wired up and asked me how her boobs looked, and we’re going, ‘Oh, they’re great!’”

Though Graves plays by self-imposed rules, he’ll occasionally bend them.

“I try to never approach in a store or restaurant, but when I saw Nick Jonas in Atticus Coffee, I had to. It’s Nick Jonas! So I quietly walked over to him and asked if it was OK, and he’s like, ‘Sure, man!’”

While Graves says no celebrities have been outright rude to his photo requests, a handful have turned him down.

“It’s a little startling when they say no,” he says. “They could be having a bad day or they don’t like taking pictures with random people. And I’m fine with that. Tim Robbins said no; he was not having it. Ethan Hawke was not acknowledging anybody — I asked, and he didn’t even answer. John Lithgow said no, but he shook my hand and that was just as good. Carlos Santana didn’t like selfies, but he was OK with getting his picture taken.”

This year, Graves is hoping to get photos with Joan Jett, Jane Fonda, Martin Sheen and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who’s helping to promote “RBG,” a documentary about her. Names on his ultimate to-get list include James Franco, Robert Redford and Joseph Gordon-Levitt.

“People enjoy looking at my pictures because they’re seeing the celebrity and they can put themselves in my place,” Graves says. “I’m every man or every person. I’m the dumpy cubicle dweller. Most people don’t get the opportunity to go up there and meet celebrities, but I do. It’s free; why wouldn’t you?”

Now Graves is getting a taste of what celebrities endure during Sundance: He’s starting to become a celebrity himself.

“I was in Park City and went by a store called Peace, Love & Little Donuts, and the owner threw open the doors and said, ‘Are you Stuart Graves? I follow you everywhere!’ They weren’t open yet, but he let us in and we got doughnuts. Isn’t that bizarre? A lot of people who know me will see me up there and they’ll want to do selfies with me now. That’s kind of ridiculous.”

## **Selfies and Sundance**

- Follow Stuart Graves’ Sundance celebrity photos at his Instagram at <https://www.instagram.com/gravesstuart> and at <https://saltlakemagazine.com/sundance-film-festival/>.

## **How to meet celebrities at Sundance**

- Go the first weekend, when celebrities are more likely to be in town at the first screenings of their films.
- Hang out on Main Street during the day and watch for groups of camera-lugging paparazzi. If they're gathered outside a venue, someone famous is likely inside and they're waiting for them to come out. The Variety and Hollywood Reporter lounge areas are good spots because celebrities will likely be doing press there, as well as the Marriott hotel area on the northern end of Main. Or you could just track down Stuart Graves and follow him.
- Get your hands on the official schedule to find out who's starring in what movie and who'll be on what panel. You might catch a big name entering or leaving.
- See someone famous? Approach from the front so they can see you coming. Celebs may get freaked out if you suddenly pop up behind them. Wouldn't you?
- Know their name, duh.
- Smile! Be polite. Ask them nicely for a selfie, autograph, lock of hair, etc.
- If they say no, just tell them thanks and move on.
- If they say yes, score! Get the photo or autograph, say thanks and continue the hunt. Don't try to engage in a long conversation, unless they engage you in a long conversation. Maybe you're actually more famous than they are.