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Big Picture: A&W's 'Allen' a big hit during Victoria commercial shoot

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Actor Allen Lulu attracted double takes during a three-day shoot at Clover Point, the Inner Harbour and the University of Victoria for a new A&W commercial that will begin airing April 17.

It wasn't as if "Allen," the affable A&W manager featured in the fast-food chain's national TV commercials, needed a bigger fan base, but he certainly got one during a whirlwind visit to Victoria last month.

During a three-day shoot at Clover Point, the Inner Harbour and the University of Victoria for a new commercial that will begin airing April 17, Allen Lulu attracted double takes.

The instantly recognizable Los Angeles-based actor is as friendly as he seems on TV, say local crews.

"Allen was quite possibly the nicest showbiz person I've ever met," said Steve Kinghorn, the Victoria-based unit manager, who had lunch with him on the last day of shooting.

Locations manager Jude White concurred, noting that while some seemingly charismatic stars "are just very good actors," Lulu was as endearing in person as he is on screen.

"People just loved being able to meet him in person," said White, recalling how Lulu was mobbed by tourists at the Inner Harbour. "All of a sudden, they'd go: 'Omgawd, there's the A&W guy!'"

While the award-winning A&W spots are what he's best known for, the actor has also appeared in films and TV shows including Bruce Almighty, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, Suddenly Susan and Charlie Grace.

Everywhere the film unit went to capture footage for the new spots promoting Teen Burgers, bystanders were struck by the ad star's warmth and willingness to pose for selfies with anyone who asked, she said.

And there were hundreds of onlookers who gathered throughout the shoot, about 150 of whom were randomly selected to fill out waivers and potentially have their 15 seconds of fame.

Kevin Tupper, director of finance and operations for the University of Victoria Students Society, was one of many UVic students picked to appear on camera.

"He's not running on a script. He was honestly just making conversation and talking to people," said Tupper, marvelling at Lulu's improvised exchanges with locals who were given Teen Burgers to taste.

"It was really authentic, which was surprising to me. They just cut Allen loose to go out there and chat with people. I think that's why people like these commercials so much."

Tupper, 21, and other students who got to meet the A&W character said the excitement on campus was palpable during a day-long shoot outside the Student Union Building.

"I didn't realize how much of a celebrity this guy is," said Tupper.

Kinghorn said UVic was a particularly good location, with plenty of willing participants interacting naturally.

"We had some really good interviews at the university," he said. "Nowadays, with social media, people seem more comfortable in front of a camera."

While setting up at UVic was "quite an operation," said Tupper, the shoot itself was straightforward. Still, it attracted considerable attention.

"Honestly, a lot of people were telling us they thought this was the coolest thing UVSS has done here all year," said Tupper, who doesn't know yet whether his own footage made the cut.

Lulu "had enormous fun" driving around town in an orange A&W food truck and chatting with so many Teen Burger-tasters, said Tom Newitt, A&W Food Services of Canada senior director of marketing and branding.

"All the people Allen talks to and that appear in the ads are real people who he meets on the day," Newitt said. "They have not been booked and they are not actors. Most people love to stop and chat with him."

The brand's personable star was "very touched" after being stopped by a woman who gave him a box of butter tarts to take along in the truck, added Newitt.

George Johnson, who has produced several of the A&W ads created by the Rethink Canada agency in cities from Ottawa to St. John's, Nfld, over the past 10 years, said Victoria was a dream location.

"It's right in the sweet spot, because it's got a nice small-town feel but it's also a city with a really good crew," he said. "And you're dealing with real people."

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