‘We Get By’ with a little help from our friends
Premiere of troop greeter film a hit
By Eric Russell
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ORONO, Maine — The scene outside the Collins Center for the Arts late Thursday afternoon captured the ultimate role reversal.

Dozens of uniformed soldiers lined a red carpet and waited to greet the filmmakers and stars of “The Way We Get By,” a documentary film by Maine native Aron Gaudet that chronicles the now-famous troop greeters at Bangor International Airport.

The movie, filmed over a four-year period beginning in December 2004, has been shown and widely praised at film festivals across the country. On Thursday, the final version of the film was unveiled for the first time to a Maine audience of invited guests at the University of Maine’s Collins Center. Public screenings will be held today and Saturday.

But for 80 minutes on Thursday, the VIP audience sat enraptured. They laughed often. They choked up at other times. When it ended, they stood and applauded enthusiastically until the credits rolled through. “Amazing,” said one guest on the way out.

“It’s not just about troop greeters; it’s about life,” said another. “It was very powerful.”

“I just want to call my grandparents right now,” said a third.

Jerry Mundy, a troop greeter since 2003 and one of the film’s three main characters, said he was pretty overwhelmed by Thursday’s event.

“To have a colonel stand at attention for me,” he said of his initial entrance. “That’s something.” On most occasions, it’s the troops who get the applause and handshakes from Mundy and the many other troop greeters who set up shop at BIA. The group, mostly retirees and veterans, has been greeting troop flights since 2001.

Brig. Gen. Brent Boyles, commander of the Maine Army National Guard, said he has met soldiers all over the country, and they always remember the troop greeters from Bangor.

“It’s about them, as it should be,” Boyles said of the film and Thursday’s event. “I’m so amazed at the personal challenges they face and put aside in order to do this.”

“The Way We Get By” is the story of Mundy, Bill Knight and Joan Gaudet, three area residents who have become involved with the troop greeters since passing retirement age. All three have their own life struggles that are portrayed in the movie, but they continue to greet troops in part because of the boost it provides in their own lives.

When first approached about the film, Mundy said he didn’t give it much thought.

“I never intended to open up that much,” he said. “But they [filmmakers] had a way.”

Gaudet, the film’s director and a native of Old Town, said the film took on a life of its own.
“It became an argument over who appreciates who more,” he said referring to the troops and the greeters. “But what’s great is that it’s not one-sided. They provide something to each other.”

Gov. John Baldacci, who attended Thursday's premiere, said before the screening that the film features a truly inspiring and universal message.

“I think the troop greeters really helped to set the tone for the entire country,” he said, referring to supporting troops without necessarily supporting the war. “They really represent each and every one of us.” U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud has been to BIA several times to watch the troop greeters in action and also attended Thursday's premiere.

“What really resonates is that they are there because they want to be,” he said.

The movie has touched audiences and critics at various film festivals, scoring a Special Jury Award at the prestigious South by Southwest Film Festival last month in Austin, Texas. It also beat out 28 films at the Cleveland Film Festival to take the Greg Gund Memorial Film Competition, which recognizes films for their social conscience.

Thursday's audience was no exception.

Yellow Light Breen, spokesman for Bangor Savings Bank, which provided some late financing for the film, said that his company got involved for the same reason the troop greeters do what they do.

“It's simple,” he said. “We had to.”

Asked what message he hopes people get from “The Way We Get By,” Gaudet said: “I hope it inspires people to get involved in their community.”

Mundy said has no regrets about being immortalized in film.

“I've seen it four or five times already and it's still emotional,” he said.

But, as Mundy said in the film, “I don't know what I'll do when [the troops] all come home.”

Public showings of “The Way We Get By” will be held at 4:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Friday and noon Saturday at the Collins Center. Tickets to the Friday and Saturday shows are $7 and free to military members. All seats are general admission.