

Codebreaker Documentary Recalls Tragic Story of the Father of the Computer

By Richard Jackoway

In 1939, Alan Turing designed a machine to break the German Naval Enigma code, helping the allies win World War II. He is also widely considered the father of the computer and helped create the field of artificial intelligence.

But there is a good chance you haven't heard of Alan Turing, who was persecuted and prosecuted for being a gay man living in Great Britain.

That Turing's life included all of this and more makes the documentary *Codebreaker*, currently being viewed in screenings on college campuses throughout the U.S., compelling viewing.

Patrick Sammon, the creator and executive producer, completed the film in 2012. He was motivated to make *Codebreaker* after learning about the English mathematician's incredible life.

"I thought, 'Why didn't I know about this person before now?' It has been very satisfying to help bring his story to a wider audience," Sammon said.

Codebreaker tells the story of Turing's life through interviews and dramatic reconstructions. It begins discussing his achievements in laying the intellectual foundation for what would become known as the computer—outlining in a 1936 academic paper the basic concept underpinning all of computing—and his groundbreaking work in cryptography that helped the British decode messages being sent to German submarines during World War II.

His wartime accomplishments were closely guarded secrets. But when Turing revealed to police investigating a burglary at his home that he was involved in a homosexual relationship with the accused, the eminent scientist was publicly prosecuted and ultimately chose to undergo chemical castration instead of jail time. Shortly after that, he committed suicide.

"It's a subtle but clear message about the importance of LGBT diversity, and the cost to individuals and society when there's discrimination and intolerance," Sammon said.

Queen Elizabeth II issued a rare mercy pardon this past December, 59 years after Turing's death.

and gender studies.

Turing died in 1954, but he has been in the news quite a bit recently.

In June, judges announced that a computer for the first time had passed the Turing Test. Turing proposed in an article in October 1950 that computers could become so skilled at imitating human



Left: *Codebreaker* Executive Producer Patrick Sammon Right: A movie still from *Codebreaker*

Sammon has been spending the past 18 months making more than two dozen appearances on college campuses, including his alma mater, Syracuse University. Many campus departments as well as chief diversity officers have requested screenings of the movie. The documentary has been used as a teaching tool for diversity and academics.

D. Chase James Catalano, director of the LGBT Resource Center at Syracuse, said the university included the documentary's showing as part of its Coming Out month.

"The film is so engaging, the students said it wasn't like they were watching a history film," he said.

Catalano noted that many students and faculty will relate to the film because of its strong crossover appeal for those studying computer science, history, mental health, political science,

thought that "an average interrogator will not have more than a 70 percent chance of making the right identification after five minutes of questioning."

In addition, a major motion picture about Turing's life is set to premiere in November. *The Imitation Game* stars Benedict Cumberbatch and Keira Knightley. The film's accuracy has been challenged, not on the science or Turing's role in history, but on the question of whether Knightley was the right actress to play the woman to whom Turing was briefly engaged.

Colleges interested in screening *Codebreaker* can reach Patrick Sammon at ps@turingfilm.com.

Richard Jackoway is the editor of *INSIGHT Into Diversity*. He can be reached at rjackoway@insightintodiversity.com.