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On the front lines Filmmaker examines Alzheimer's, dementia

By Jody McVeigh
Editor

Producer/Director Keith Famie recently set his sights on Grosse Pointe while filming his upcoming documentary, "On the Front Lines of Alzheimer's & Dementia."

The film is set for release next spring, but Famie will present an extended trailer during a private screening event 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 6, at The War Memorial, 32 Lakeshore, Grosse Pointe Farms. The event is sponsored by The Family Center, in partnership with The War Memorial, Grosse Pointe News and Pointe Magazine.

Famie, who has completed several series on topics ranging from veterans to women and aging, decided to focus a series on aging in general. With his "On the Front Lines" series, he plans to tackle issues such as poverty, drug abuse, cancer and others, but wanted to kick off the series with a look at Alzheimer's and dementia, "because I lost my father in 2003 to Alzheimer's," he said. "I'm glad I chose it, especially after talking with people for several months for this film. It's probably the No. 1 fear of most people — losing their cognitive sharpness, being a burden to their family. Clearly this is the big dog in the room when it comes to aging — losing one's sense of who we are."

Famie, 57, said most people age 40 and over know someone who has experienced some form of dementia.

"They've seen that chalkboard slowly erased, their existence fading away," he said. "It's frustrating, tormenting, embarrassing. They're robbed of their dignity."

Famie said the point of his film is not to "tell an old story new." Rather, he wants people to understand what strides have been made and what is being done about dementia. The film covers five dementias, including Alzheimer's, as well as

what it's like to have the disease, what it's like to be a caregiver, caregiving strategies, how cognitive decline takes place and more.

"How do we stack the deck as an aging population?" he asked. "What can we do collectively to find that sense of discipline, combined with education and new research, to live longer, healthier, cognitive lives?" "The aging person today is not the aging population of the Greatest Generation," he continued. "Baby boomers approach the aging process a little different. They're not staying with the status quo. They're approaching dying differently. They're questioning everything and that's pushing research and new ideas."

Famie said the film features ways people are getting active to prevent the onset of dementia, including through different types of yoga, music and other methods. During his Nov. 7 visit to Grosse Pointe, he stopped by the home of Denise Robison Mullen, 78, who is learning to play the banjo for the first time, in an attempt to stave off dementia.

"We've found learning to play a new instrument

skills. She just wants to play for her grandchildren — and maybe one day with Steve Martin — and hopes the newly acquired skill will benefit her health.

"Denise is all attitude," Famie said. "She has a great attitude about life. She exudes this ability to look at life with a wonderful attitude."

Famie also visited the Grosse Pointe Senior Men's choir practice to film a spot about socialization — another key to good health.

"That's why I want to feature men singing, not because they're fabulous singers — although they are impressive — but that they get together," Famie said. "We know men suck at aging. We work our asses off, then we become older, children leave the home and we find ourselves with just our mate and very little friendships that we've forged. We find ourselves lonely and tired and in some cases financially stricken individuals. The highest rate of suicide is among men age 55 and older."

"The senior choir is just an opportunity for men who are 70, 80, 90 years old to get together," he continued. "I asked them why they do it and they say they like the



Famie watches as Hewitt captures a shot of the

is incredibly complicated," Famie said. "As we age, our synapses are dying off. One of the fastest ways to create new synapses isn't doing a crossword puzzle every day; it's forcing the brain to do something it's never done before."

Mullen, who lost her husband of 44 years to Alzheimer's, isn't looking to hop onstage to show off her banjo-playing

camaraderie, they like the guys. They have a joie de vivre attitude about depth of life. You see the sparkle in their eye. I would say if they were not a part of the Senior Men's choir, they would not have it."

Famie's stop in Grosse Pointe is just a fraction of what the film explores. He continues to travel the state and the country to gather material for "On



PHOTOS BY RENEE LANDUYT

From left, Cinematographer Kevin Hewitt, Producer/Director Keith Famie, Associate Producer James Sauod and Associate Producer Kim Brown prepare to film student Denise Mullen and teacher Levi Hensen.

the Front Lines," which he plans to premier next spring at The War Memorial, with a performance by the Senior Men's choir.

In advance of the premier, he hopes the community gets a taste for what's to come at the screening event.

"It's a 24-minute trailer; it will be a two-hour film," he said. "People will walk away inspired, educated, touched. Many will ask how they can adopt what they've learned into their life. With cognitive decline, you need to do something 10 years before there's a symptom. This is all out assault on cognitive decline. I want people to take away from this to do the work now. Eat better now. Exercise now. Socialize now. I hope there's a sense of urgency that comes out of this film."

"I want the Grosse Pointe community to understand what we're doing and the significance of this film," he continued. "I love the fact I know what we do helps people. We're doing it so people understand. This is the most gratifying thing I've done in my life."

The Dec. 6 event also features resource tables, courtesy of The Family Center, which has been serving the community 17 years.

"The topic fits our mission well of serving our community through programs and resources vital to today's families," said Debbie Liedel, executive director of The Family Center. "Building a strong support system

is critical and that's what The Family Center can do best: help those in need of resources and referrals confidently find valuable information and trusted professionals."

After 10 years as director of The Family Center, Liedel said she too is leaning on its services.

"I never expected to need its services," she said. "My 92-year-old mother is challenged

Center is here to help," Liedel said. "Call us at (313) 447-1374, email us at info@familycenterweb.org or visit our website at familycenterweb.org for articles, videos and referrals through our Association of Professionals. Supported solely by community contributions, our matching gift opportunity has been extended through Dec. 31."



PHOTO BY RENEE LANDUYT

Denise Mullen is interviewed by Keith Famie as Associate Producer James Sauod stands by.

The Details

Who: Producer/Director Keith Famie, The Family Center, The War Memorial, Grosse Pointe News, Pointe Magazine.

What: "On the Front Lines of Alzheimer's & Dementia" extended documentary trailer.

Where: The War Memorial, 32 Lakeshore, Grosse Pointe Farms.

When: 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 6.

Why: This gathering will give the community an opportunity to learn about the film and offer their support.

Info: Register at warmemorial.org/familycenter or call (313) 881-7511.

The Family Center
Resources for Families, Individuals and Professionals