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## Livonia man talks about grief in new TV series on death



**Michael Kovalcheck of Livonia and his wife, Toni, who died in January 2015.** (Photo: Submitted)

*Sharon Dargay, Hometown Life*  
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Michael Kovalcheck wants to convey a message of hope through his appearance in the new documentary television series, "Embrace of Dying: How we deal with the end of life."

The show, which starts Monday, Feb 8 on WTVS Detroit Public Television, is the final installment in local filmmaker Keith Famie's three-part look at aging. Famie interviewed Kovalcheck, a local resident, last year for a segment on grieving, which will air during "embrace of Dying" episode 4, at 7:30 p.m. Monday, Feb. 29.

Kovalcheck and his wife, Toni, would have celebrated their 40th marriage anniversary last fall if she had survived another year in her battle with stage-four cancer. Toni died in January 2015, just a few months after appearing in a segment on women in cancer in "Embrace of Aging, the Famie perspective on Growing Old," Famie's second installment in the aging series. Toni was one of three breast cancer patients profiled in the program. The Kovalchecks explained how breast cancer had affected their lives and how they had faced challenges.

In the upcoming series, Kovalcheck will talk about his grief experience and observations about death.

"When Keith first asked me it was fresh. I was four months into this," he said. "I thought about it. I didn't know if I could do it. Should I do it for Toni?"

"Then it came to me. I need to do this because people are grieving and they can have hope. I want to show there is hope. Will our lives be the same physically? No. But spiritually you become stronger. My wife is more alive than when she was here. I believe that in my heart. My wife had a smile on her face when she died. She is in pure love that words can't explain.

"From my perspective, dying is an earthly thing. It's the true beginning."

### **Grief Process**

After Toni died, Kovalcheck read extensively about grieving and discovered that some books on the subject "are gold for kindling and some are on the mark." He attended a group workshop through Good Mourning Ministries, which is based at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Plymouth, and still attends one-on-one counseling sessions at Angela Hospice. He also has offered encouragement and support to other individuals with loved ones in hospice and prays with those who are in mourning.

"I am a grief counseling amateur," he said. He still sets a coffee cup out each morning for Toni and visits her grave two or three times a week. He said he feels at peace there.

Kovalcheck's strong Catholic faith helped him through her death and his feelings of loss. He believes in praying daily for deceased loved ones.

"I think dying has always been a dirty word. When someone we loved dies, we have pain. We all hurt and it's not beautiful to hurt," he said. "People say they want to celebrate life on earth. Memories are

important, so we celebrate the past, but also we should celebrate the future. What we should celebrate is the fact that they are in a spot that we want to get into. I can't wait to be with her. I'm excited about being reunited. I never say my wife died. I say, Toni went home."

Kovalcheck acknowledges that some individuals, especially those who recently experienced the death of a loved one, may shy away from watching "Embrace of Dying." But he said the series might also offer a path to healing.

"Maybe they will find some peace in hearing someone else verbalize how they feel. I think that can help some people."

Kovalcheck hasn't seen the series, but plans to watch the weekly episodes on television.

The shows air at 7:30 p.m. Mondays. Episodes include:

- Introduction, Feb 8: An overview of what dying means as the Baby Boomer generations approaches its twilight years. The episode includes a look at a 96-year-old doctor still practicing medicine in Durand, a collection of "objects d'mort" in Chicago, Ill., thoughts from a psychiatric neuroscientist from Wayne State University, and interviews with funeral directors.
- Hospice and Terminal Illness,, Feb. 15: The show travels to England for a historical perspective on hospice, spends a day with rabbis at the Jewish Hospice and Chaplaincy Network, visits a hospice patient, and includes an interview with a "death midwife."
- Funeral Directors, Feb. 22: The program focuses on the funeral profession and its history, a mortuary science student from Wayne state University, and military funerals. Roger Husband of Husband Funeral Home, in Westland, also recounts his experience preparing Rosa Parks for her funeral.
- The Eulogy, Feb. 29: The episode looks at the eulogy in the grieving process, how the Mexican culture regards death, and includes stories from individuals who lost loved ones, including Michael Kovalcheck of Livonia.
- Cemeteries, March 14: The show travels to cemeteries in England, France and Detroit.
- The Afterlife, March 21: The program visits the Afterlife Awareness Conference and the Death Cafe in New York City, NY.
- Pay It Forward, march 28: The show looks at how death can be a new beginning for someone else, through scholarships, memorial foundations, and organ donation. it includes interviews with the Ingram family of Carleton, founders of Miki's Minutes, an organization that provides calling cards for deployed troops, and with organizers of the Rich Rau Memorial Bicycle Tour in West Virginia, established in honor of a bicyclist who was killed while riding his bike. Viewers also learn about the story of Jimmy Williams who donated his heart through Gift of Life Michigan.
- Memorials, April 4: The series ends with a look at objects and activities used to remember loved ones. It also looks at the Cryonics Institute and explores memorials of the future, from new-age burial methods to the role of technology in archiving lives.

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