



FARMINGTON HILLS

TV series brings life to subject matters on the elderly

By Sherri Kolade Posted February 22, 2016



FARMINGTON HILLS — How did the American culture of death and dying come to be?

When do you talk to children about death? What happens when and after we die?

These questions and more are dissected during the third and last installment of “The Embrace of Aging” program on Detroit Public Television this month: “The Embrace of Dying — How We Deal with End of Life,” which premiered Feb. 8 as an eight-part series.

The first two installments focused on the male and female perspectives of growing old.

Director and producer Keith Famie has now released the last installment, which delves into the history of hospice care in London, discussions on the history of funeral directors in America, the right-to-die movement, Gift of Life Michigan organ donorship and grief, according to a press release.

Bob S. Lewis, investment associate vice president at Farmington Hills-based Merrill Lynch Wealth Management, was interviewed for the third and last installment of “The Embrace of Aging” program on Detroit Public Television this month: “The Embrace of Dying — How We Deal with End of Life.” (Photo provided by Keith Famie)

The show also features a tour of some of the most iconic cemeteries in the world, including the historical Mt. Elliott Cemetery in Detroit.

Famie, 56, said that when he turned 50 he grappled with growing old.

“Certainly, (there is) more time behind you than there is in front of you,” he said, adding that he wanted to start a conversation on how Americans approach the dying process.

“It gets fairly in-depth as we peel back the layers,” Famie said. He added that the show deals with the influence of baby boomers and what kind of impact Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who assisted people in their suicides, made.

“Did he have a positive or a negative impact?” Famie said. “He definitely created a dialogue of what we do in America.” Famie said the baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are moving up in age “like a tsunami.”

“Never before (have we) faced such an aging population at the same time,” he said. He added that as people are living longer, some are taking care of their parents.

“That creates a whole dichotomy of issues,” Famie said. “They were part of a movement in America that changed the course of America like never before.”

He said the baby boomers came from a time of protest, rock ‘n’ roll, drugs, sex, peace and the Vietnam War, and they are even going into the funeral process differently.

“I want my casket to look like Elvis,” he said of someone’s request. “There is a tremendous change in the dying process. All these different ways we can ceremonially celebrate someone’s life: plant them at the bottom of a tree, put them (their ashes) in a ring.”

From funeral service expos to learning how veterans are laid to rest honorably, the series features a number of interviews by Famie, an 11-time Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker, of Farmington Hills.

David Techner wears two hats. He is the funeral director of Southfield-based Ira Kaufman Chapel and president of the West Bloomfield-based Jewish Hospice and Chaplaincy Network. He and Famie have worked together before.

“Keith and I have talked about a key number of issues, but in terms of explaining death to kids it is more or less what do you say, how do you say it,” Techner said. “Make it easy for people to understand.

“Your grandpa’s body just stopped working, his heart stopped beating, and his brain stopped working; he has eyes, but he can’t see. He has a nose, (but) he can’t smell. He has a mouth, but he can’t talk and he can’t eat ... and he doesn’t have to pee and poop anymore,” Techner said of explaining to young children. “When you tell a 4-year-old (someone) doesn’t have to pee and poop anymore, it’s like, oh my God, they really get it. Then we start focusing on the most important thing, and that is called memory.”

He said that with a Jewish funeral home, for the most part, people are buried in shrouds as opposed to clothing, and there is no embalming process.

“Our funerals are done a little bit quicker,” he said. “We don’t necessarily have the visitation that Christian funeral directors and ... families have. Instead of that, we have something called ‘shiva,’ which is the process where people visit after the burial takes place, and that is a little bit different.”

The shroud, a white linen burial garment worn throughout the Jewish world, is symbolic of everyone coming into the world and leaving the same way. “It doesn’t matter how rich you are, how poor you are. In the eyes of God, you are all created equal,” he said.

Bob S. Lewis, investment associate vice president at Farmington Hills-based Merrill Lynch Wealth Management, spoke to Famie in the show about being financially prepared before death. He is one of 20 members of the Kulhavi Wealth Management Team at Merrill Lynch. Lewis said his speciality is retirement planning and estate planning.

“From a financial perspective, what do you need to get assembled? What do you need to ... address, the pre-dying type of thing,” he said.

Lewis added that if you cannot manage things financially because of health or mental challenges, you need to select someone you trust, a role player, to take over.

“You have to nominate them legally before you do that,” he said. “It is not easy for relatives to discuss these things. ... These things have to be done during life.”

He said people should have the discussion so relatives don’t have to get a “crash course” when it is too late. “Where are your documents? What are your passwords? Who do they talk to?” Lewis asked.

Lewis added that he had a recent operation for something minor, but he put together an “in case I don’t make it” file for his wife.

“That was the file name, and I gave it to my wife,” he said. “I want to be ready. I want you to know all the things I would tell you if I were still here.” Famie said that in the end, it is vital to talk about death, although it can be uncomfortable. “We don’t want the thought of losing ... someone we love,” he said. “Let’s have that dialogue and ... what we can do to celebrate his or her life.”

The eight-part series airs at 7:30 p.m. Mondays on WTVS Detroit Public Television. For more information, go to www.embraceofaging.com.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Staff Writer Sherri Kolade covers Farmington, Farmington Hills, Farmington Public Schools, and Oakland Community College for the Press. Sherri Kolade has worked for C & G Newspapers since 2013 and graduated from Central Michigan University.

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