

Embracing that which must come

Filmmaker stops in Naples to shoot scenes for documentary about aging featuring local man fighting cancer

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Wednesday, January 18, 2012

With the dawn of each new day, we take one step closer to the grave. It's not a thought most people wish to ponder, but the often hushed subject of aging will come to the limelight in a documentary being filmed around the globe, including a stop in Naples.

Michigan filmmaker Keith Famie, a one-time cast member of "Survivor: The Australian Outback," came to town last week to set sail with Naples resident Robert Nichol, a decorated Vietnam War veteran who is staring death in the face as he battles Agent Orange-induced prostate cancer.

"The guy was a big-time hero. He saved lives," Famie said of Nichol, who was awarded two Purple Hearts, the Silver Star medal and two Bronze Stars, along with other Army commendations for his 20 months of service with the 501st Infantry Division. "He's got a clock ticking and he knows it."

Famie and his team from Visionalist Entertainment Productions, winners of nine Michigan Emmy Awards, also planned a rendezvous with the Naples Tango Club for the "use it or lose it" segment of the documentary.

"I think it's going to add a great dimension to the film," Famie said. "Everybody wants to embrace the fountain of youth. Let's dive in and really help people understand how they can live healthier longer."



“The Embrace of Aging” will focus on the male perspective of growing old as the first in a three-part series. The sequel will delve into the female perspective of aging, while a third film will zero in on the end of life with “The Embrace of Dying.”

“As we age, the reality is death is there,” said Famie, who, at age 52, has traveled the world to explore the nuances of humanity. “There’s no way around it.



When you get over 50, you realize, ‘I’m on the other side of the fence.’ The question is, How do we live healthier longer?”

In a culture where fad diets ebb and flow with the revolving door of modern medical advice, this is no easy question to answer. On his quest, Famie visited “blue zones” on the Italian island of Sardinia, where shepherds routinely live into their 90s or even past 100, dying naturally rather than from disease.

They don’t take medications, don’t take vitamins and don’t go to the doctor, Famie noted. He took along metabolic nutritionalist Dr. Tom Rifai to provide his perspective on the pastoral Mediterranean lifestyle.

When Famie delved into the topic of prostate cancer, the most common cancer among American men, he turned to Dr. Kenneth Pienta, a leading prostate cancer specialist and research director with the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Pienta put him in touch with Nichol, who was amiable to allowing the filmmaker access as he and his wife, Michelle, experience the emotional extremes of battling this “silent killer.” One poignant moment comes when Dr. Pienta is filmed explaining the eventual transition to hospice care.

Nichol had no warning signs before he was diagnosed with the disease in 1999. A high PSA (prostate-specific antigen) level was uncovered when his blood was tested as part of a medical weight loss program.

“I was pretty surprised,” noted Nichol, who remembers walking through the Vietnamese jungle carrying sacs of ammo, “and the trees would just be soaking wet with the defoliant Agent Orange.”

Now, at age 66, Nichol spends his evenings with Michelle, watching the last rays of light sink below the horizon on the Gulf of Mexico. “We like to go out there and try to keep our eye out for that green flash,” he mused.

The Park Shore resident also likes to sail his 30-foot Catalina when the waters are friendly. “Sometimes I sail down in Marco Island, where we race competitively, if I’m feeling good,” he said.

Nichol agreed to participate in the film as a way to help other men understand this disease and raise awareness on healthy living. Before moving to Naples to enjoy the sunshine full-time, Nichols lived in Michigan, where he ran two businesses and organized a golf fundraiser for Pienta’s research program at the University of Michigan.



Both Nichols and Famie said they have modified their lifestyles as a result of this documentary. Nichols makes an effort to walk his golden retriever every morning, eats healthier and works out with a personal trainer.

After filming a senior softball player having his carotid artery cleaned out, Famie has forever sworn off hamburgers.

“I’ve dropped four or five pounds, I eat very little sugar, almost no bread and no gluten. I’ve literally adopted a whole different lifestyle,” Famie said. “I take the stairs, just do the little things to take control of my life and stack the deck.”

While the medical community offers little consensus on how to prevent prostate cancer, one Naples resident says she may have discovered a critical component of male health — through tango.



Helaine Treitman, owner of the Naples Tango Club, not only teaches men and women to dance, but also to embrace their masculinity or femininity.

“In the last 40 years or so since feminism, people’s gender roles have been kind of confused as we swung the pendulum the other

way,” Treitman said. “I believe every physical disorder, every illness stems from some kind of emotional base. If whatever we are meant to be is not expressed, we will get illnesses. A man expressing his masculinity, I predict, will help to prevent prostate cancer.”



Famie filmed several of Treitman’s senior clients dancing the tango, which Treitman claims will transform an insecure man into a solid, powerful man who women will be naturally attracted to.

Perhaps choreographed dancing is not as “un-macho” as men tend to think, Famie noted.

The film also will touch on “man caves” and warding off diabetes and dementia, a subject dear to Famie’s heart, as his father died of Alzheimer’s disease nine years ago.

“How much can we do in a 90-minute film? I don’t know,” Famie said. “I’m going to cram a lot in there, and I’m planning to make quite a bit of noise.”

“The Embrace of Aging” is scheduled to premiere this fall in Detroit, Toledo and Naples, followed by a PBS showing. A trailer may be viewed at www.embraceofaging.com.

