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Keith Famie, From Celebrity Chef To Filmmaker Focused On Aging

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Keith Famie began his career as a chef, lived in France, worked all over the world, had restaurants, won food and wine awards, became a celebrity chef on The Food Network, and ended up on "Survivor: The Australian Outback." (He was the last one voted off.) But when his father died from Alzheimer's nine years ago, Famie had a proverbial wake-up call.

"My father's death had a significant impact on me in a whole range of ways," said Famie. "I was holding his hand for the last moment, when he took his last breath. I had a lot of bitterness and anger. The guy had lived this long life and I thought to myself: 'So this is it? Right here? This is the end?' It was so curious and bizarre, too. He was done. Gone. History."



At that point Famie, pushing 50, decided to change his life completely. "I was done being that travel chef guy. I wanted to do something more significant with my life. I wanted to do something that would help people tell their stories." Famie, who had his own production company and knew how to produce and direct, went on to shoot a number of Emmy-award-winning documentaries on a range of human interest subjects, including immigrant stories, the challenges faced by Vietnam vets and the world of the blind.

But as he aged, said Famie, "I'd watch my teenage son grow up bigger and stronger than me and I started thinking: 'What is it *really* like to grow old? What's it really like on a deep level?' I decided to go on a quest to find out." The result is a three-part series currently in-progress for PBS Michigan dedicated to exploring the many aspects of aging.

The first documentary in the series is "[The Embrace of Aging: The Male Perspective of Growing Old.](#)"

"You women are more organized than men and are more willing to talk about age than us," said Famie. "We guys haven't learned how to cultivate social networks. We get old and lonely, and the adage remains true: That men are stubborn and wait until the last minute to take care of themselves. A lot of this is emotional -- men don't want to be seen as weak.

"The whole aging process has so much to do with things that are invisible: emotional turmoil builds up steam in the body, settles in as disease and starts to break things down," he continued. "There are many things that can expand men's lives if they become more aware of what they're feeling. I want to look at all that: what's it's really like for men to age and how they can do it better both emotionally and physically, get more out of life, and grab that last item off their bucket list."

To do so, Famie turned his camera on an extensive range of men who articulate many issues facing their gender: a man with prostate cancer staring death in the face; men who run marathons and triathalons (including Captain Ivan Castro, who was blinded by a mortar round in Iraq in 2006 and is currently the only blind Special Forces officer to serve on active duty); senior competitive softball players; a recently widowed man dealing with grief; and men at a "Manuary" in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, getting away from their daily lives ("not your Vegas trip," Famie is quick to note).

Accompanied by medical experts, Famie also went into "Blue Zones" -- Sardinia being one of them, with its community of elder shepherds and goat herders -- to cover men who live healthy lives well into their 80s and 90s with little medication. He also speaks with medical specialists at Harvard studying telomerase (an enzyme that some researchers believe is the key to reversing premature aging) and with aging specialist Ken Dychwald, among others.

Famie wants to draw not only from their critical knowledge, but from their personal experiences as well. "I want to say to those doctors and specialists: What scares *you*? What *really* scares you personally about aging as a man -- and what are you doing about it?"

Famie's documentary will ripple the waters on a range of other questions preoccupying American men as they struggle with questions of identity, happiness and self-worth at a time when books like Maureen Dowd's 2005 "Are Men Necessary?" and Hanna Rosin's forthcoming "The End of Men" point to an already highly publicized power-shift in gender relations.

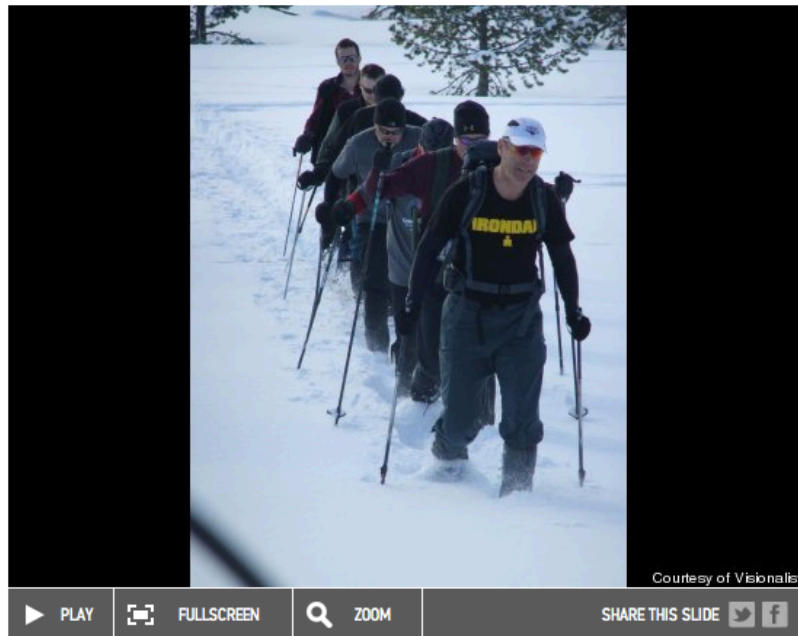
"I think human beings are innately and genetically connected to the earlier species we once were," said Famie, evoking the concept of the man cave and the perennial differences between men and women. "There's something in our DNA that will always connect us back to earlier homo-sapiens; to hunter-gatherers. A guy likes to think that he is the master of his domain. And one of the things men are very afraid of when they age is the idea of not being relevant -- not being relevant to their spouse, to their kids, to their careers. We need to talk openly about it all."

Famie's hope is not only that men of all ages will understand their aging selves better; he hopes that the women in their lives -- their wives, daughters, friends and co-workers -- will understand them better as well.

The next in his series, fittingly enough, will focus on that flip side of the coin, covering the female perspective on aging. His final documentary in the series, "The Embrace of Death," will explore different cultural perspectives on the final frontier. "Where do we go?" Famie asks. "Let's get it out on the table. Let's talk to our scientists and astro-physicists and to ordinary people. Let's get everyone talking. It doesn't matter what you believe or if you agree or not. Let's just get talking."

"Manuary"

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"Manuary," created by Tom Rau, 60, of Brighton, Michigan, defines a period of time that he and some close male friends share at his Jackson Hole retreat in January and February each year. In its third year, "Manuary" has proven to be very emotional and physically gratifying as they reflect on their lives as aging men. Some men also brought their sons along.



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