



New documentary series explores aging and women

Sharon Dargay Staff Writer 12:41 p.m. EDT October 10, 2014



Livonia residents Michael and Toni Kovalcheck are featured in *The Embrace of Aging*, the female perspective of growing old.

Documentary filmmaker Keith Famie aims to inspire and inform women through his new 13-part television series, *The Embrace of Aging*, the female perspective on growing old.

But he says men should watch the program, too.

“I think women will embrace it and love it. We filmed some very courageous women facing difficult situations in life,” he said. “It’s almost more important for men to see it. It’s impossible not to walk away with a new-found sense of understanding of women. It only enhances a guy’s relationship with females...whether that’s his mother, his sister, his aunt or his wife.”

The program, which includes a mix of interviews with medical professionals, gerontology experts and women from all walks of life in communities around the globe, might nudge a husband to talk with his wife about their romantic relationship. Or inspire a son to remind his mom about her annual wellness exam. Or compel a brother to help his sister in caring for their elderly aunt.

“I dare a guy to walk into a room while a lady is watching it and switch channels,” Famie said. “If a guy wants to score big time, he says, ‘Let’s watch it together.’”

Toni and Michael Kovalcheck of Livonia are likely to do just that when the program airs at 2:30 p.m. starting Sunday, Oct. 12 on Detroit Public Television. Kovalcheck is one of three breast cancer patients profiled in the series. The couple tells how stage four breast cancer has affected their lives and explains how they’ve faced their challenges.

“I just turned 59. It has been a long journey,” Kovalcheck recently told the *Observer*. “My daughter said to me one day, ‘Mom, you’ve been dealing with cancer more than half of my life.’”

Aging with cancer

Kovalcheck was 41 when a 6-centimeter tumor was found in her left breast. She underwent chemotherapy and then a mastectomy and radiation. She had “a few good years” before experiencing symptoms nearly six years ago. The cancer cells had resurfaced in the omentum, a layer of fatty tissue that covers and supports the stomach and intestines. The stage-four cancer is inoperable because it’s “almost like seeds spread out” through the omentum, Kovalcheck said. She’s undergoing chemotherapy again as the cancer “ups the ante” and she has increasingly experienced more symptoms.

Her sunny attitude, strong faith and supportive friends and family — especially her husband, Michael — have helped her face the challenges of growing older while also battling illness.

“Some people get to their 30th birthday and are already depressed about being old. Are you kidding me? As long as I can get up, put on my make-up, and feel happy, that is what matters in life,” she said. “I’m so blessed. I’ve got an empty nest, which I love, and I’ve very lucky to have such a good, kind husband.”

Kovalcheck met Famie through her doctor, Anne Schott, M.D., an oncologist from University of Michigan Health System, Ann Arbor, who also appears in *The Embrace of Aging*. She agreed to be in the series because she thought it would be fun, something different do do.

“My attitude is try it. Get out and try new things every day. Do what you can. If I were in a wheelchair I would figure out a way to have a blast.”

That’s the attitude of many of the women shown in the series, from a 95-year-old yoga instructor to a 70-something triathlon athlete.

Different perspectives

The Embrace of Aging, the female perspective on growing old, continues Famie’s aging series that started with the release of a seven-episode documentary on the male perspective earlier this year. Famie, a Novi resident whose Visionalist Entertainment Productions is located in Wixom, said the women’s series offers more depth than its predecessor.

“The content is richer. Women are more open to discussion,” he said.

Famie has won Emmy Awards for his documentaries on various ethnic groups in Detroit, World War II and Vietnam War veterans. He’s currently working on a 13-part series called *The Embrace of Dying* that explores end-of-life issues and experiences.

His own personal curiosity inspired the aging series.

“Four years ago when I turned 50, I thought ‘My God, what is it like to get old?’ Clearly there is more time behind me than in front of me. Clearly, more healthy time is behind me,” he said. “I wanted to figure this out.

“Never before have this many people aged at one time,” he said, referring to the Baby Boomer generation. “We’re all on the same merry-go-round. We’re all on the same issues. Why not talk about it? I thought It was important that individuals walk away from (the documentary) entertained, enlightened, inspired and educated.”

For more information about Famie’s works, visit V-Prod.com

The Embrace of Aging

Tune in at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, beginning Oct. 12, on Detroit Public Television.

- Oct. 12: Episode 1 sets the stage for the series, with women talking about what it means to age.
- Oct. 19: Experts talk about how breast and ovarian cancer affect women as they age.
- Oct. 26: The program tells stories of three women, including Toni Kovalcheck of Livonia, who are battling breast cancer.
- Nov. 2: The episode sheds light on how couples grow old together and still maintain a loving relationship.
- Nov. 9: Professions tell why having a close circle of friends can improve your health. Features a group of girlfriends who enjoy mountain climbing.
- Nov. 16: Doctors and patients talk about diabetes and arthritis. The episode takes viewers into the OR as one woman undergoes a knee replacement.
- Nov. 23: Experts talk about heart disease. The program also includes an interview with members of WomenHeart, a national organization.
- Dec. 21: Eva Feldman, Ph.D., from the University of Michigan Health System, teaches about dementia & Alzheimer's.
- Dec. 28: The episode looks at why staying active helps women stay strong as they age. The show goes behind the scenes with the chair of a gala fundraiser for the Detroit Institute of Arts and shows elderly athletes with a never-give-up attitude.
- Jan. 4, 2015: Several women, including a farmer, researcher, wildlife rescuer and conservationist, show why it's important to have a purpose in life and be engaged in a project or daily activity.
- Jan. 11, 2015: The show travels to Okinawa, Japan, where a combination of diet, exercise and community make a world of difference in the lives of elderly women.
- Jan. 18, 2015: A look at holistic and alternative medicine and a visit with women, including a 95-year-old yoga instructor, who embrace aging without pharmaceuticals.
- Jan. 25, 2015: Mireille Guiliano, author of *French Women Don't Get Fat*, and *French Women Don't Get Facelifts*, talks about aging from her home in Provence. The program also includes closing comments from others.