

Cognitive health: If you have a brain, you need to pay attention to the dementia battle

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A sold-out Royal Music Theater audience got a preview June 3 of Keith Famie's documentary "Those on the Front Lines of Alzheimer's & Dementia" and the full-length documentary hosted by JoAnne Purtan will air at 9 p.m. Wednesday, June 27, on WTVS-TV (Channel 56), Detroit Public TV.

I first met Famie when he reached out after I wrote a column about dealing with my dad and dementia. He invited me along as he filmed and interviewed many locals for his documentary. He even invited us to share dad's story for his film.

I had no idea that this terrible disease would reach me and have such a profound affect on my life. It hit hard, it hit fast and has left us reeling with not only sadness, but incredible stress as we navigate the waters of caring for both our parents and our own families simultaneously. As Famie states below, if you have a head with a brain in it, you'll do yourself a favor and pay attention, gain knowledge ahead of time and plan for your own cognitive future and the future of your family.



Below are 11 questions with Famie about "Those on the Front Lines of Alzheimer's & Dementia."

Hometown: Dementia is not exactly a sexy subject. Why spend two years filming a documentary that is not only a tough subject to talk, about, but one that few want to hear about?

Famie: If you ask most aging baby boomers what scares them the most about aging and illness, just about everyone's first concerns is losing their cognitive health, knowing what this would mean for loved ones left caring for them. Unfortunately, these baby boomers have first-hand experience with this, having to care for their own parents or spouse. So while the production was challenging to start, once the research and initial interviews were completed, it was clear we had a very important story tell.

Hometown: What is the biggest lesson you have learned during the filming of "Those on the Front Lines of Alzheimer's & Dementia"?

Famie: Personally, I need to become far more aware of basic things like sleeping well at night, physical activity, how I eat and find the time to nurture brain-related activities.

Hometown: Your dad died of complications from Alzheimer's. Was there a special motive pushing you during this film?

Famie: When my father died in 2003 after several years of his Alzheimer journey, I had a front row seat to his cognitive decline. Many times I tried to embark on this film, but just couldn't come up with the right direction. There is no question that my time caring for my dad was the catalyst behind the film.

Hometown: As a former celebrity chef, you know a thing or two about food. Is there anything new involving diet and dementia that has come to light?

Famie: We all have learned a great deal about what is good eating and not so good eating; common sense should be the first line of defense for everyone. You don't have to be a health guru to know that sugar-filled soft drinks or fast food is not good for you. With that being said, eating for brain health is the same as eating for body health, we are just

now learning that foods good for cardio health are also good for brain health. So dark leafy greens, blueberries, lean meats like chicken, turkey, diet low-fat meats and dairy — all as organic as possible, wild, fresh salmon, moderate consumption of alcohol and low consumption of alcohol well before bedtime, since it can disrupt your sleep.



One of the biggest takeaways was what we learned about the diet of the people who live in the Blue Zone region of Ogimi, Okinawa. They have some of the lowest rates of any dementias in the world, almost non-existent. One of the researchers who has studied their diet, Dr. Paul Alan Cox, came to the conclusion that they consume far more L'Serine through foods they eat than we do, like, off the charts amount. His studies focused on answering the question could a diet high in L'Serine actually become a protector to tangle diseases like Alzheimer's?

Hometown: Who needs to pay attention in the dementia battle and why?

Famie: Anyone who is walking and breathing with a head on their shoulders that has a brain in it. One thing I learned, for sure, we take our cognitive health for granted. Once a cognitive problem surfaces, the horse has left the gate, meaning it's too late to reverse the problem. The tangle-related diseases that are creating the plaques in your brain have been developing for years. So a simple way of looking at this is this: "How you live your life today will determine how you cognitively age tomorrow."

Hometown: Are there any funny stories that you can share from the filming of "Those on the Front Lines of Alzheimer's & Dementia"?

Famie: A few come to mind, When Teepa Snow was working with families at the Brown Center, she would interact with both care givers and dementia patients.

On a couple of instances when talking about living with their diseases, Teepa was interacting with the participants one on one. Many of them while trapped in this world were still quick-witted enough to come back with some one-liners we kept in the film. Larry Dean, when asked about his forgetfulness, quickly responded, 'Sometimes I like to forget on purpose.' Of course, everyone laughed and Debbie Horwitz sitting next to her mother Jane was surprised when Teepa was talking with her mom and commented that she has a beautiful daughter. Jane looked over at her and said, 'Sometimes.'



Hometown: If you were Michigan's next governor, would this be a topic you would pursue? If so how and why?

Famie: As a governor (for sure not in my cards) I would do everything in my power to protect our most precious resources of the water we drink and the water we play in. One very disturbing finding in our film is how we, as stewards of our environment, may be causing our own cognitive decline and not realizing it.

Hometown: How does the subject of dementia stack up with other tough subjects you have tackled as a documentary film producer?

Famie: All of our productions take us down a path of uncertainty; each one has offered complicated challenges. We never really know where the journey is going to take us. When dealing with very personal topics that involve family and loved ones facing life-altering circumstances, such as a disease like Alzheimer's, the challenges come with being able to build relationships of trust when I am filming and interviewing with those families. For me personally, each time I sat with a person, especially an older gentleman, I would find myself thinking deeply about my father Albert.

Hometown: Is there a dementia hero that emerged in your mind while filming this project?

Famie: Clearly that would be Teepa Snow. Her work in helping families better understand how to help a loved one who is on a journey with a form of dementia can be a game-changer for so many. I think also the heroes in this film are all those who were brave enough to allow us to share their very personal story in an effort to help others to learn.

Hometown: The film has plenty of local angles, but this is more than a local story?

Famie: The film is far more than a local story. While we hail proudly from Michigan, we filmed all over the country for this film. Dementia does not have a particular ZIP code. Anywhere you go in America, if you ask someone do they know of someone with a form of dementia, you will for sure hear "yes." An example is our beloved Robin Williams. We all know that he had died of suicide, but what many are not aware of, because they only recently found this out through an autopsy, is that his diagnosis of Parkinson's was incorrect. They now know that he was suffering from Lewy body dementia.

Hometown: What's next for Visionalist Entertainment Productions?

Famie: In the coming 16-24 months, we will embark on the film "Those on the Front Lines of Cancer" as well as a look at the life of Capuchin friar Solanus Casey for the film "Blessed Casey's Journey to Sainthood."

Dan Dean is content strategist for Hometown Life. Both of his parents live with dementia and his dad Larry is featured in "Those Living on the Front Lines Of Alzheimer's & Dementia."