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'Those on the Front Lines of Cancer' to Air on PBS

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Survivors, educators, doctors help local producer/director Keith Famie produce an eye-opening documentary about cancer.

Photos courtesy of Visionalist Entertainment Productions

Almost 2 million people will be newly diagnosed with cancer this year, and almost 607,000 people will die from the disease, according to statistics from the American Cancer Society.

Local producer and director Keith Famie wanted to know what Michigan oncologists, as well as oncological clinicians and researchers from across the country, are doing to combat a disease that instantly brings upheaval to a person's life and the lives of their loved ones.

"Cancer is frightening," he said. "It's this beast with the ability to morph itself. It makes it so difficult for oncologists (to treat) because it has the ability to change itself."

Famie, with the cooperation of approximately 100 people, including Jewish doctors, patients and leaders of cancer-focused service organizations from Metro Detroit, will release the three-hour documentary, *Those on the Front Lines of Cancer*, this month.

The full documentary will air on Detroit Public Television/PBS, Channel 56, in Detroit with the first hour showing from 9-10 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 10, and the remaining two hours from 9-11 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 17.

The documentary, produced by Famie's Visionalist Entertainment Productions company, is broken into 21 segments that include a look at specific cancers like breast cancer, blood cancer, prostate cancer and childhood cancers as well as segments on precision medicine, community organizations that serve those with cancer, the issue of opioids and marijuana in allaying cancer symptoms and financial toxicity related to paying for cancer care, among other subjects.





Jeffrey Taub, M.D., a specialist in pediatric hematology/oncology at Children's Hospital of Michigan, treats Glenn, a child with cancer. Both are featured in Keith Famie's documentary.

Famie previously produced a documentary about Alzheimer's disease and dementia, and those on the front lines of battling those diseases, among other health-related documentaries.

"I asked myself, what are the diseases that take you out of the game of life? I lost my father to Alzheimer's," Famie said. "The natural one to gravitate to [next] is cancer."

Famie interviewed oncologists and cancer researchers from the University of Michigan, Children's Hospital of Michigan in Detroit, Henry Ford Health System, Beaumont Health, Ascension Providence Hospital and the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute, in addition to experts from hospitals and health organization across the country.

He and his crews also filmed about 25 people who have experienced cancer themselves and share their stories.

Sheila Sky Kasselmann, head of the Sky Foundation, which raises money for pancreatic cancer awareness and research, is one of the film's producers and stars. Kasselmann was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2007, and said she never expected to be part of such a project.

"Few of us with pancreatic cancer live for a long time and I'm a 12-year survivor," she said. "I had what is known as Whipple surgery (an operation to remove the head of the pancreas, the first part of the small intestine, the gallbladder and the bile duct). I survived it, but it leaves a mark. I'm 79 years old and I do everything. I'm very busy."

Kasselmann said it's her hope that by supporting the film, as well as appearing in it as a cancer survivor, it will educate people about tough-to-treat pancreatic cancer.

"I was so pleased and happy that we would have pancreatic cancer as part of the film," she said. "It will bring awareness of the disease and, hopefully, it will bring hope."

"In having spent time with some of these cancer researchers, [I've learned that] a lot of us have caused our own problems and now we're paying the price," Famie said. "How do we get back to some of the basics? How do we avoid cancer? What can we do from a lifestyle standpoint to stack the decks in our favor?"

"I wanted to address a lot of complex issues but to give people practical advice," he said.

Famie and his production crew spent two years making the documentary and just recently finished filming.

Kids Kicking Cancer, a global organization founded by Rabbi Elimelech Goldberg, also known as Rabbi G, is also featured in Famie's documentary. Goldberg is also a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Pediatrics at Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit. The Southfield-based organization helps children cope with the pain and fear of their cancer diagnoses through meditation and martial arts moves.

"It's important for people to understand that cancer is a very treatable disease," said Rabbi G, who lost a young daughter to cancer. "The power of the mind transcends pain and fear and anger associated with the diagnosis of cancer. We learn we don't have to be defined by the disease."

Rabbi G said the children who took part in the filming were thrilled to be part of the project.

"We always tell the children they are teaching the world," he said. "When people film the children, it just re-emphasizes they are teaching the world. They are powerful martial arts teachers."



Rabbi Elimelech Goldberg, founder of Kids Kicking Cancer, talks about the power of the mind in dealing with a cancer diagnosis.

Famie hopes that people take from the documentary a sense of empowerment about their own health and the belief they can take proactive measures to thwart a cancer diagnosis.

"Staying on top of maintenance of your body is important," Famie said. "How we live our life today determines how we live tomorrow. You really have to be your own advocate." In hearing other people's stories about their experience with cancer, Famie believes the film will have a deep emotional resonance with his audiences.

"My approach has always been to understand the story of the journey that someone is on," he

said. "Nothing is more rewarding than someone saying, 'This (documentary) helped me go see the doctor. It's taught me to be more proactive about how to live life.'"

To learn more about *Those on the Front Lines of Cancer*, visit ontodaysfrontline.com/cancer.

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