

Midwest Best Life

EMBRACING AGING

New TV series from Keith Famie tells the stories of women growing older and finding grace in longevity

By Kristen Jordan Shamus
Detroit Free Press staff writer

The crow's-feet at the corner of her eyes are etched a little deeper. Hot flashes strike at the most inconvenient times. Each new wiry, gray hair pokes up from her scalp, practically shouting, "Look at me!"

She is a woman in America, and she's not as young as she used to be.

By 2050, population experts predict 89 million Americans will be 65 or older — more than double the number in that age group in 2010, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Aging washes over some women like a tidal wave, bringing an overwhelming cascade of feelings of regret about things they've yet to do, things they wish they'd done differently in their youth, things they wonder if they will ever accomplish. For others, it's a reason to celebrate rather than mourn.

Emmy award-winning filmmaker Keith Famie has produced a 13-episode series that unmask what getting older means to women around the world in "Embrace of Aging: The Female Perspective on Growing Old," which debuts Oct. 12 on WTVS-TV (Channel 56).

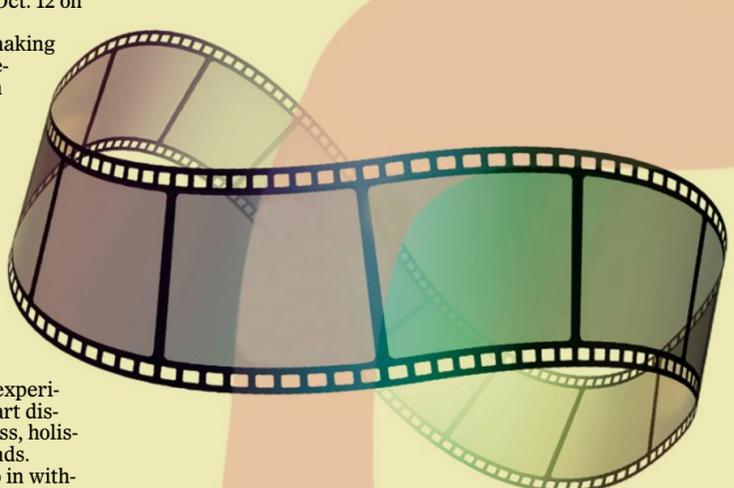
The series — nearly two years in the making — takes viewers to Gilda's Club Metro Detroit to meet cancer survivors; to Jackson Hole, Wyo., to meet friends who bond through mountain climbing; to Okinawa, Japan, where the world's longest-living women give an example of grace in longevity, and many other places to tell the story of women growing old.

"The most challenging part for me going into it as a guy was how am I going to build the confidence and the faith and trust in me with women to talk about issues relating to women," said Famie, 54, of Novi.

Yet he found a way to get them to talk about the hyper-personal details of their experiences with menopause, breast cancer, heart disease, ovarian cancer, caregiving, loneliness, holistic healing and the value of close girlfriends.

"I had to go in very humbly. I had to go in without any airs and I couldn't approach it like I know what I'm talking about because women are sensitive, and they will chew you up and spit you out," said Famie, who is best known for a stint on the

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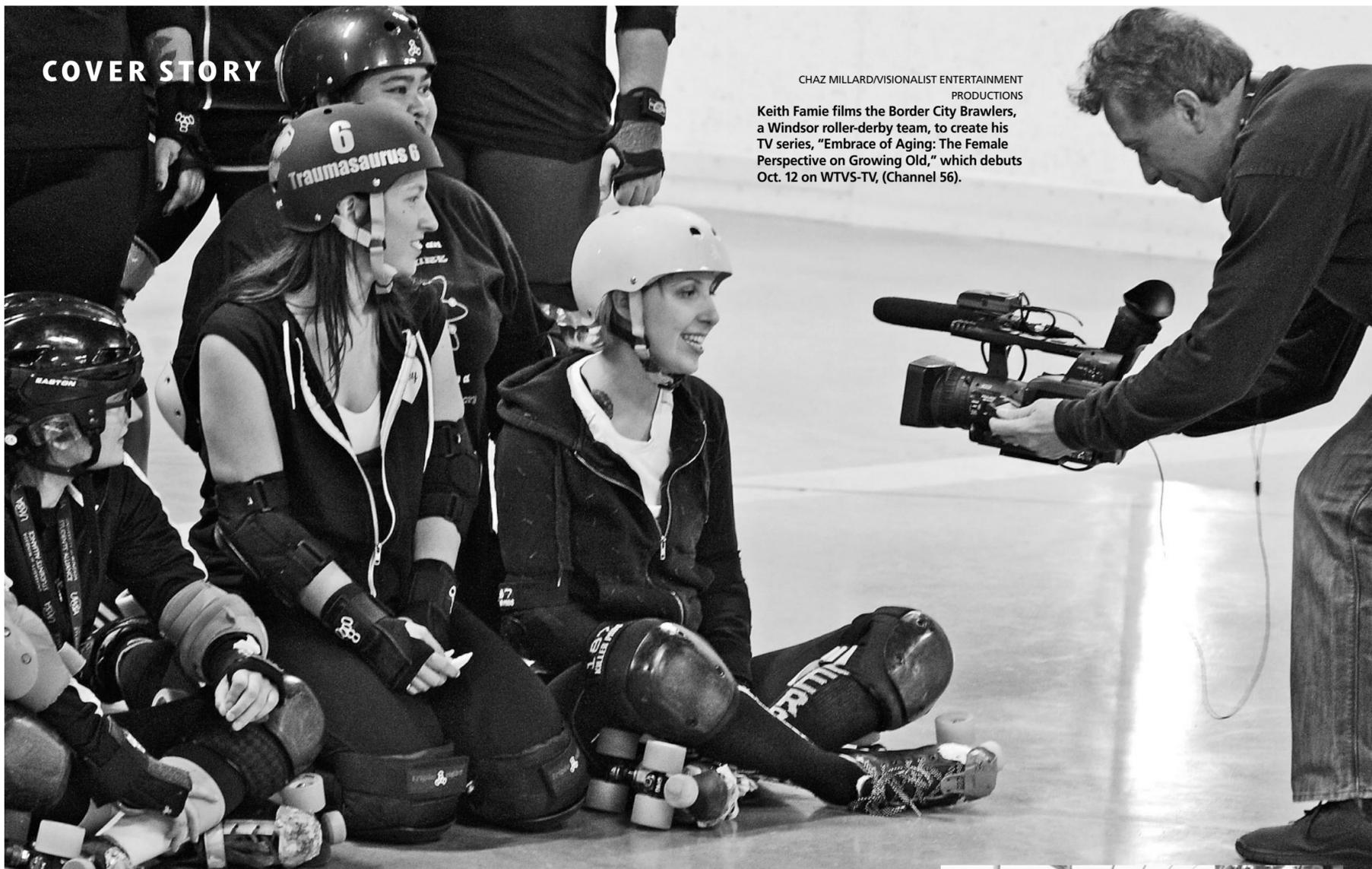
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CHAZ MILLARD/VISIONALIST ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTIONS

Keith Famie films the Border City Brawlers, a Windsor roller-derby team, to create his TV series, "Embrace of Aging: The Female Perspective on Growing Old," which debuts Oct. 12 on WTVS-TV, (Channel 56).

AGING: TV series tells women's stories

FROM PAGE 1E reality TV show "Survivor," and his work as a chef on the Food Network's "Keith Famie's Adventures."

"The very first segment of the very first episode is all around this one question: 'How old are you?'" said Famie, whose now-shuttered Les Auteurs restaurant in Royal Oak won him critical acclaim in the late 1980s and '90s. "Some answer it. Some won't answer it. Some will lie. They'll tell you they lie. It's just such a relevant thing and it's inside of you."

Laura Varon Brown, executive director of Gilda's Club Metro Detroit, said Famie's passion for storytelling was evident as he filmed breast cancer survivors at the club's Royal Oak offices earlier this fall.

"It's just been an incredible privilege to work with him," said Varon Brown. "So much of what Keith does now is a labor of love. He could have a restaurant or he could be traveling the world for the Food Network, but he chooses to make films, really important films."

"What he's doing is shining an incredible light, and very personally, on something we're all going to deal with."

Varon Brown said the Gilda's Club members filmed for Famie's series highlight the importance of friendship as they prepared to model bras for the organization's annual Bras for a Cause fund-raiser.

"They're all breast cancer survivors who are modeling our bras for a really empowering runway show and are so proud of their journeys. ... They had each other at different points in their disease. There's nothing like that sisterhood of walking that same path."

Each episode in the film series features medical experts, women who are dealing with their aging bodies in different ways, and the men who love them.

"I really love it," said De-

siree Cooper, director of community and media relations for Planned Parenthood Advocates of Michigan, who is to introduce the series on Detroit Public Television. "It's not heavy-handed. If you put the words 'aging' and 'woman' in the same sentence, it doesn't always feel like a happy combination. We are taught to dread aging, not be proactive about our health or see aging as part of the wonderful process of living and dying. I think the way the subject is broached is huge. It's very uplifting."

"Embrace of Aging: The Female Perspective on Growing Old"

Keith Famie's 13-series documentary 2:30 p.m. Oct. 12 WTVS-TV (Channel 56).

Cooper said that it touched her deeply on a personal level as well.

"I'm one of those women embracing aging," she said. "I hurt when I get out of bed. I have a harder time climbing the stairs now. I'm a grandparent. All of those issues, I'm looking at them. I'm a caregiver of someone with dementia; my mother has Alzheimer's. There are 13 segments, and there probably isn't one of them that hasn't touched me personally."

Singer/songwriter Jill Jack penned the anthem for the series, "Look Beyond Your Horizon," and plays a big role in several of the episodes.

But she wasn't easily convinced to go on camera.

"I said, 'I'm not going to be in that movie.' I was just turning 50, so it was touchy at the time when he asked me," Jack said. She was concerned about how her age might affect her music career and people's perceptions about her as an artist.

"For me, it was really difficult, because you see the major national acts in their 20s and 30s, and you see the ones who are really rocking still, I think J Lo is in her 40s. There was a part of me that said, 'I'm 50 now, so I've got to end this. I'm done,'" said Jack, who is now 51 and touring.

"But then part of me was like, 'Screw that. I'm a better

writer and performer now than I've ever been. Why stop now? Who's deciding that I've got to stop now?' Fifty is truly a number that can freak you out."

Jack, who has won 37 Detroit Music Awards, and lives in Ferndale, said Famie convinced her to be part of the series at her 50th birthday celebration at the Ark. She's glad she did.

"There is a negative connotation to aging, but Keith is totally changing people's minds about that," she said. "You have to embrace it."

Famie said that though the series is aimed at women's experiences with aging, there's much for men to learn from it.

"If you've got a woman in your life, and it's impossible that you don't — whether it's a mother or a sister or an aunt or grandmother, wife or girlfriend — this will benefit

your life. You will walk away educated, enriched, entertained," he said. "This is something guys really need to wrap their head around."

Sallie Justice, a spokeswoman for the Area Agency on Aging 1-B, said Famie's work is important.

"I've heard it called it the silver tsunami. We need to do our best to be prepared for it," said Justice, referring to the predicted rise in the nation's 65-and-older population. "I think it's fantastic to draw attention to the issues of aging. It's a conversation that's not discussed enough, and it's not an easy time in many people's lives. It can be a wonderful, too. It's a mixed bag, as life is."

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JoAnnée DeBruhl, 53, followed her passion to grow food and help others after she was let go from her job.



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Anca Iordachianu is a cancer survivor and owner of Wheatgrass and Sprouts, an organic juicing business in Troy.



CHAZ MILLARD/VISIONALIST ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTIONS

Keith Famie films Ferndale-based singer/songwriter Jill Jack for his new series on the female perspective on growing old.



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Juanita Gee, 41, of Novi has stage 4 metastatic breast cancer. She has been raising her 8-year-old daughter Alexis Gee alone.

Caregiving Expo

The Area Agency on Aging 1-B will host its 15th annual Family Caregiver Expo from 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Oct. 18 at the Best Western Sterling Inn, 34911 Van Dyke Ave., Sterling Heights. The free event provides support and access to information, resources and services for people who care for elderly or disabled adult family members or friends. Details: www.michigan caregiverexpo.com or 800-852-7795. No preregistration is required.

"Family caregivers are faced with mental, physical and financial stress, as they balance caring for an aging or disabled family member," said Tina Abbate Marzolf, chief executive officer, AAA 1-B in a news release. "The Caregiver Expo provides that connection to help empower caregivers, reduce their stress and improve their outlook and quality of life."



CHAZ MILLARD/VISIONALIST ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTIONS

Patty Ewing, 75, of Jackson Hole, Wyo., and her husband, Frank Ewing, 78, care for Patty Ewing's mother, Leta Deveraux, 105.



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Brenda Badish, 71, of Brighton with her trainer, Kelly Fletcher (front, center), after completing her third sprint triathlon.



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Breast Cancer survivors from Gilda's Club of Metro Detroit talk about their experiences with growing older for the TV series.

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