

Keith Famie: Alzheimer's disease just doesn't give a damn who you are

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Keith Famie has taken many journeys in life. The documentary producer has traveled the world with his own celebrity chef television programs, appeared on "[Survivor: The Australian Outback](#)" and owned top-rated restaurants in metro Detroit. But it was dealing with his dad's dementia that altered his life course.

"Alzheimer's doesn't care who you are ... just does not give a damn," Famie said from the office of his production company, Visionalist Entertainment Productions, in Novi.

Visitors entering the VEP office are greeted with a visual record of Famie's vast travels. A cooking photo from a Maasai village in Kenya on 9/11 in one corner. Numerous framed photos showing him with the likes of President George H.W. Bush and Steven Spielberg from his Food Network days adorn a wall in another corner. In between, photos and memorabilia honoring World War II veterans featured in the documentary "Detroit: Our Greatest Generation" form a prominent display.

But tucked into a cupboard above his computer is a special black box. Adorned with images of his dad, it holds his father's ashes and is a constant reminder of the most challenging journey of the 57-year-old Novi resident's life.



Keith Famie poses in his office with the ashes and photos of his dad who died from Alzheimer's. (Photo: Dan Dean | Hometownlife.com)

"Until you've had a loved one living with Alzheimer's, or a friend, do you really understand the journey they are going to go on or the journey you're going to go on?" Famie said. "It's as hard on the caregiver as it is for patients."

When his dad died in 2003 from complications associated with Alzheimer's he started to question what he was doing, who he was doing it for and who gains from it all. That experience led to him hanging up his apron to become a documentary filmmaker.

Vested interest

"I was tired of everything being about me ... I just wanted to live life differently ... I wanted to tell other people's stories, I wanted to do documentaries," he said.

Famie's latest project hits close to home. ["On the Front Lines of Alzheimer's & Dementia"](#) will air in the spring on Detroit Public Television.

"I lost somebody – I have a vested interest in this story," he said. "I always vowed to one day do what I could to help families facing the same fate.

"When my dad died, I made a conscious decision to make a documentary on Alzheimer's ... as we did the series on aging ... It was only a matter of time," he said.



A display of World War II memorabilia from the documentary "Detroit the Greatest Generation," includes his dad's "Fly Boys" cap and other items. (Photo: Dan Dean | [Hometownlife.com](#))

Between the photos and memorabilia on a wall directly in front of his desk a large dry erase board is a constant reminder to the breadth of the story he has set out to tell. The history of Alzheimer's; what new facilities are adding to treatment; what a doctor tells a new patient; what is memory? The list goes on and keeps growing as Famie learns of new leads.

When Bill Gates announced late last year that he was donating \$50 million to Alzheimer's research an article was posted on the white board and Famie started to call on contacts in an attempt to get Gates to appear on camera.

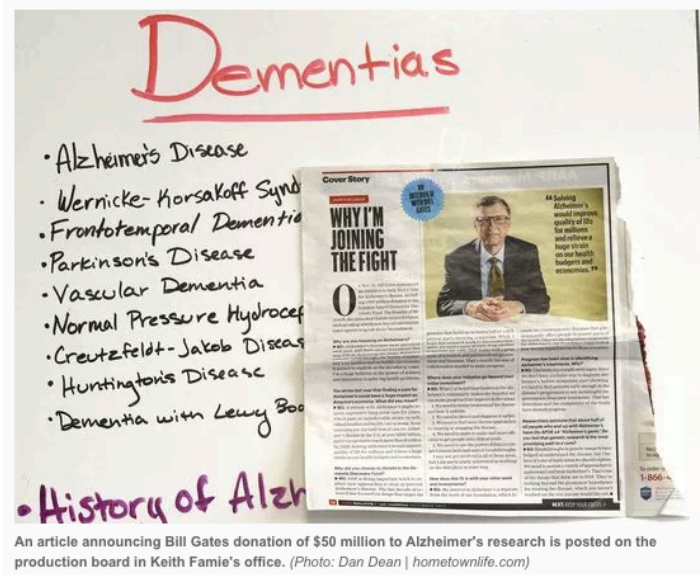
Famie's goal is to open a window into dementia. Get people talking about the sixth leading cause of death in America so we can get beyond it being thought of just a disease people get when they get old. A large part of the film is dedicated to new research that is showing the disease can be prevented or slowed.

"So now, there is a way to try and stack the deck in your favor or your loved one's favor for the clearest, healthiest, cognitive aging journey that you can go on," Famie said.

We can control how we age

"(Dad) was smarter than most, but he didn't know how to live, he didn't know how to age," Famie said. "One thing that I have learned over the years is how we live today will determine how we age tomorrow and that is just as simple as it can be."

It is a common theme in "On the Front Lines." Segments of the film will show tai chi classes, ballroom dancing, yoga and community center activities along with interviews with experts from the University of Michigan Alzheimer's Disease Center, Henry Ford Hospital, Wayne State University and the Alzheimer's Association.



An article announcing Bill Gates donation of \$50 million to Alzheimer's research is posted on the production board in Keith Famie's office. (Photo: Dan Dean | [hometownlife.com](#))

Interspersed will be real stories on the front lines like that of my dad, who was filmed for the documentary after battling scammers for over three years. All these story lines are meant to be weaved together attempting to inform and change the mindset that Alzheimer's and dementia do not have to be a common part of aging.

"As human beings, we make a lot of excuses," Famie said. "We're lazy. I am speaking for myself. We're always, like, 'It will happen tomorrow.' 'I will take care of it later,'" he said. But, he explains, later is now and one of the most important things we need to find inside ourselves is discipline.

"We have been given a plethora of information – it comes at us in all stages every day," he said. "Don't do this, do that, drink this, don't drink this, eat more of this, do more exercise. It's there. We can discern commonsense stuff — it's how much of it do we apply to our own lives?"



A photo in his office shows Keith Famie with movie producer Steven Spielberg. (Photo: Dan Dean | hometownlife.com)

"I think you have to dig down deep a lot of times and just say, 'Hey, if I am not going to do this for myself, let me just do it for the loved ones around me.' To help them, as I age, to not have to take care of me," he added.

"I think that is a real concern for ... the baby boomers who are aging now – it is like a tsunami," he said. "Never before in history have we had so many people aging simultaneously. A lot of baby boomers are concerned over whether the millennials will be there to take care of them. It is a good serious question, a very serious question: 'Will they be there? Will they be as caring, as empathetic and as concerning as we were, as we are, for the Greatest Generation?'"

"We as a society, we can all work together to navigate through these waters of aging and, hopefully, the documentary will help people."

For more about "On the Front Lines of Alzheimer's and Dementia" visit [Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.](#) or Facebook [@FrontLinesofAlzheimers](#)

Dan Dean is managing editor of hometownlife.com. His dad deals with dementia and will be featured in Famie's



(Photo: Dan Dean)

upcoming documentary. Email him at ddean@hometownlife.com Follow him on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter @HTLEditor](#).



Keith Famie holds a photo of he and his dad. (Photo: Dan Dean | hometownlife.com)