

Documentary shows the positives of growing older

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North York Mirror | Jun 08, 2013

The stories they tell are a mix of fact and fiction. They forget names and faces of loved ones. They laugh easily and sing songs. And they might not be in the best health or have much longer to live, but they are full of life.

Angela Bianchi made these discoveries while observing her elderly aunt interact with friends she made at the Harold and Grace Baker Centre, a retirement residence and long-term care facility at Caledonia Road and Castlefield Avenue.

“They’re funny, but stationary,” the York resident said. “They are still living.”

A documentary filmmaker, Bianchi had the idea of video taping her 93-year-old aunt, Domenica, along with several of her companions, for a film she later titled *Zia and Friends*.



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The 43-minute film, complete with English subtitles, will be showcased at the Italian Contemporary Film Festival (ICFF), which runs June 26 to July 6.

After watching a similar documentary about those living at Baycrest, Bianchi said she wanted to make a film to help erase misconceptions attached to the elderly.

“I wanted to take away the stigma they are lethargic, they can no longer contribute,” she said. “I think people are afraid of old age.”

Domenica was living on her own and doing just fine at age 90, until a mental health episode in early 2010 forced Bianchi to call for an ambulance.

“She was delirious,” she said. “She didn’t know who I was, who she was. All of a sudden we were in a world of hospitals.”

Her aunt calmed once arriving at the hospital, but Bianchi knew Domenica could no longer live alone.

Bianchi moved Domenica, who shows signs of dementia, but has not been formally diagnosed, into the Harold and Grace Baker Centre in February 2010.

“She has stabilized now,” Bianchi said, adding her aunt takes medication to help keep her calm. “She eats, she talks to people, she laughs a lot. I am focusing on the positives of her situation.”

Bianchi acted like “a fly on the wall” when she shot the footage in the summer of 2011, asking few questions and letting the scenes unfold naturally.

“I’m happy how it turned out,” she said.

Now in its second year, the ICFF will feature some 62 Italian and Italian-themed features, shorts and documentaries. The 11-day festival will centre on Italian life, culture and history.

Asked what she’s learned in the three years her aunt has been at the facility, Bianchi said family support is imperative.

“Having family there makes a difference,” she said. “Go visit mom and dad, grandma and grandpa. If you sell their house, use the money to pay for a caregiver to be there with them. The nurses at the home can’t do everything.”

Zia and Friends will be screened Saturday, July 6 at TIFF Bell Lightbox, 350 King St., at 3 p.m. Admission is free.

For information, visit www.icff.ca