Filmmaker mines lessons for aging well in documentary on the lives of older lesbians in a NorCal health study

Description

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Deborah Craig has a certain empathy for older lesbians: She watched her mother come out at age 50. Vulnerabilities felt in aging can be magnified with worries of being accepted, she learned.

That was in some part the impetus for Craigâ??s most recent film, â??A Great Ride,â?• which explores the lives of lesbians aged 69 to 83 in three different California communities. The award-winning documentary was shown recently at the Legacy Film Festival on Aging in San Francisco.

â??I definitely thought about my mother while making the film and think (hope) she would have loved it,â?• said Craig, who came out in the 1970s. â??I think she was very happy that I was a lesbian as she could talk with me about the challenges she faced.

The idea for the film evolved from a study on lesbian health that Craig, a lecturer in the Department of Health Education at San Francisco State University, worked on.

Deborah Craig

Through that study she met Brenda, a former Oakland resident proud of her African-American heritage. She moved to Vallejo for more affordable housing and now lives by herself in a house in a multi-ethnic community. Shirley Liberman lives alone in Oakmont, a retirement community of single-family homes in Santa Rosa, as do couples Sue and Patty and Nancy and Marjorie. Sally lives in a rustic cabin in a â??womenâ??s separatist communityâ?? in the wooded landscape of Willits.

Lessons for every identity

The film is a continuation of Craigâ??s interest in making socially conscious films, using compelling personal stories to raise awareness about the challenges and strengths of underrepresented communities. â??I made a film on women who had HIV/AIDS and the positive influence of community gardens in low-income neighborhoods.â?•

Moreover, Craig said, she has always been drawn to older people. â??My father was a refugee from Germany and my mother was an only child. Growing up, I sought comfort in the older people in my neighborhood as surrogate grandparents.â?•

Craig weaves several themes through her documentary. â??I was trying to explore the drawbacks of aging â?? loss of friends, abilities, your driverâ??s license, with the benefits of aging â?? being more comfortable in your own skin, having a perspective on all the fun activities you can do now.â?•

Sally Gearhart, Willits

The title â??A Great Rideâ?• comes from her use of cars as a metaphor for the womenâ??s individual personalities â?? Sallyâ??s Jeep, Shirleyâ??s Jaguar. It also reflects feedback she got that most of the challenges faced by older lesbians are faced by all older people. â??After all, life for all of us is a journey, an adventure, a â??rideâ??,â?• she said.

In doing the film, she learned that the ride to older age is made much easier with help â??Â both receiving and offering.

The Oakmont Rainbow Women, Santa Rosa

The Oakmont lesbians have encouraged their city friends to retire there. Increased numbers make it easier to find help, such as when a partner gets sick. â??Since most of us donâ??t have children, we need each other to rely on when things get serious,â?• said Liberman, adding that â??with more of us living here, itâ??s easier to be out in the larger Oakmont community.â?•

Brenda has found support in Vallejo outside the organized gay communities found in larger cities. â??I used to be active in the LBGTQ community in New York City and when I lived in Oakland, but now Iâ??ve found acceptance and support in the church,â?• she said.

Brenda Crawford, Vallejo

Sally and her friends in the Willits community have been self-sufficient since the early 1990s. But there is concern now for the future. They bought the land in the 1970s, envisioning retirement in a separatist utopia, a sort of lesbianâ??s Old Folks Home. â??Our numbers have dwindled with people dying,â?• Susan said.

Helping others is the other side of creating a healthy old age. Craig noted that a significant part of her subjectsâ?? lives is spent in helping others, she said. â??Brenda registers voters. The Oakmont women raise money for a womenâ??s shelter. Sally is an environmental activist.â?•

And they are funny, said Craig, another trait thatâ??s helpful, especially during difficult times. â??I didnâ??t ask them to be funny. They talked about death with a lot of black humor.â?•

From photography to music to public health

Craig hopes she is funny and joked about making her own granola and tie-dyed tee-shirts growing up in liberal Berkeley, near where she and her partner live now.

As a teen, she was interested in photography. â??I was too timid to take portraits, so I concentrated on street photography, looking at what was out there in an abstract sense, discovering the importance of leaving things out of a frame.â?• After graduating from Berkeley High School, she attended Wesleyan College in Connecticut, but felt out of place in that â??privileged East Coast school.â?•

She spent a year in Paris, returning to California to study photography through Berkeley extension courses. She played drums in a jazz band. In 1983, she moved to New York City to pursue a music career. â??It was very exciting, but very difficult. I was broke most of the time.â?•

Craig went back to school at Columbia University in New York City to finish her bachelorâ??s degree in history. â??I thought about graduate school in history but that didnâ??t pan out.â?• In 1988, she returned to California, working as an editor and technical writer for computer companies. â??I kept taking photography classes and eventually studied photography at what is now California College of the Arts in Oakland.â?•

In 1998, she took a job at the software company PeopleSoft, where she worked for six years. â??I got too busy to keep up with school, so I didnâ??t quite finish my BFA. I made good money but hated it.â?• After getting laid off, Craig reflected on her career choices. â??I realized I wanted a career focusing on people that was service-oriented and involved equity and social justice. That turned out to be public health.â?•

So, she enrolled then completed the mastersâ?? program at SFSU in 2006. She also studied film through a program that enabled students in her field and others to work together with film students to make socially conscious films. After graduating, she began lecturing in the universityâ??s Department of Health Education. She also teaches at Mill College in Oakland.

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Whatâ??s next

â??A Great Rideâ?• premiered at the Frameline San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival in 2018 and has since been screened in over 40 international film festivals. It has won several film awards and can be viewed on Amazon Prime Video.

Craig is presently fundraising for her next film, which focuses on Sally Gearhart, also featured in â??A Great Ride.â?•

She was a gay rightsâ?? activist who worked alongside Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in California. In 1973, Gearhart became the first open lesbian to hold a tenure-track faculty position in a university, San Francisco State. She also founded one of the first womenâ??s studies programs in the country.

â??Itâ??s time she was given her due,â?• said Craig.

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Date Created
27/10/2019
Author
jrobbins