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Filmmaker chronicles young woman's cancer fight and legacy

By K. Michelle Moran
C & G Staff Writer

METRO DETROIT — He promised the dying young woman he would get her to the ocean so that her ashes could travel the globe as she never would, and on July 26, filmmaker Keith Famie kept that promise.

Joined by several of her nine siblings, Famie released Maire Caitlin Kent's ashes from a glass vase into the New York Harbor against the backdrop of the Statue of Liberty and a "beautiful sunset" around 8:15 p.m.



But her story — and the lives she has touched and continues to touch — lives on in ways Famie said he never could have imagined. The young woman, who was felled by cancer on Sept. 27, 2013, far too young after a brutal 10-month battle with the disease, is the focus of the forthcoming documentary film "Maire's Journey." Part awareness-raising and cancer-fighting fundraiser, part memorial, the film will document the life of the woman Famie came to know as just Maire — pronounced "Mary."

"Maire's story became everybody's story, which is what it should have been," Famie said of the more than 1,400-mile journey by water that her ashes took to get to the ocean, carried in a small, handmade wooden boat. "There isn't anybody that hasn't been touched by cancer."

After a difficult childhood, a stint in the U.S. Army at 18 and a failed marriage, things were finally starting to turn around for Maire. At 22, while working as a nurse's assistant at a nursing home, she realized she wanted to become a nurse.

Friends weren't surprised the compassionate, spirited and outgoing young woman would be drawn to a career where she could help others. But fate had other plans. After suffering from flu-like symptoms and receiving several misdiagnoses from a series of doctors, Maire checked into the University of Michigan Health System in November 2012. Cardio-oncology specialist Dr. Monika Leja delivered the bad news: Maire had cardiac sarcoma, a rare and often fatal cancer frequently found in young people.

Although the prognosis was grim, Maire opted to fight.

Famie, a 10-time Emmy Award-winning producer and director who was working on a film series about people dealing with the end of life, met and interviewed Maire for that series. But moved by her story and strength, Novi resident Famie, a native of Farmington Hills and former West Bloomfield resident, ended up following Maire for the last eight months of her life.

“I became very close to Maire,” Famie said. “She’s the same age as one of my daughters. We spent a lot of time together.”

Inspired by the children’s book “Paddle-to-the-Sea,” from which Maire learned to read as a child, Famie enlisted a blind carpenter to build the 3-foot-long pine boat that would carry her ashes to the ocean. She wouldn’t travel alone: A 12-member “crew” of people who’d also lost their lives to sarcoma cancer “joined” her, their names and photographs affixed to the watercraft, which was hand-painted by another craftsman. On the boat’s sail, a message to anyone who might find it along the way:

“My name is Maire; I died of cardiac sarcoma cancer. My ashes are enclosed in this boat and I am on my way to the ocean. If you find me, please set me back on my path. I will bless you from Heaven. If I have reached the ocean, please let me brothers and sister know. You can reach them through my Facebook page, ‘Maire’s Journey.’”

On July 12, Maire’s boat was launched on the shores of Lake Michigan in Cross Village. Executive producer/director Famie and his small crew — which includes executive producer Thomas Rau and producer/co-director John Feist — documented the encounters strangers had with Maire and her boat along the way, and set up a website and Facebook page so that others could share their own impressions. At press time, Famie estimated that hundreds encountered the tiny boat in person, while thousands more got involved via social media. And they continue to get involved, sending messages and donations as word keeps spreading about Maire and her journey.

While on a training exercise on Lake St. Clair the afternoon of July 17, members of the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club’s Junior Sailing Team encountered the tiny wooden craft. Securing it with a rope to one of their vessels, the teens brought the boat back to shore with them. As they read the inscription, the young sailors vowed to share their own posts on the Maire’s Journey Facebook page, and they carefully lifted her boat out of the water, taking it inside the club and drying it off. They also tolled the club’s tower bells 14 times in honor of Maire and her crew.

Pasha Vreeken, 17, of Grosse Pointe Farms, said she was eager to get Maire’s boat back in the water because “it’s got a long ways to go.”

“I think it’s a cool way to be remembered,” said Caroline Breen, 14, of Grosse Pointe Park.

After locating Maire’s Facebook page on a smartphone, one of the young sailors read her story to the others, who leaned in to listen closely. The teens were visibly moved by Maire’s saga.



So many people who encountered the boat had stories that mirrored, or intersected with, Maire's. Famie said a GPYC member on a boat transporting Maire's ashes lost his ex-wife to cardiac sarcoma 20 days before Maire, and she had the same doctor. Maire's boat became lodged under a bridge on the Erie Canal, and Famie said diners at a restaurant above gathered to watch as a young man swam toward the boat to free it. The boat got trapped again directly in front of the restaurant, and Famie said one of the diners screamed when she saw it. The reason? One of the crew members listed on the boat was George Davis, and the woman who screamed had lost her father — a different George Davis — to cancer 20 years earlier.

"We've had a lot of moments like that along the way," Famie said. "There's something going on here far beyond our earthly understanding."

Feist is based in Los Angeles but agreed to help friend Famie on this project, having lost his own father to cancer and being witness to the battle his sister and her husband are now waging against cancer. Feist met the former chef while Famie was a contestant, and one of three finalists, during the 2000 filming of "Survivor: Australian Outback."

In Mackinaw City, a lumberjack in the Straits of Mackinac found Maire's boat and offered to transport her, explaining that his mother had died of cancer, Feist said. But first, he had to attend a lumberjack show, and the film crew captured footage of the people there learning about Maire.

"Everyone is touched by cancer," said GPYC Manager Tom Trainor. "At all of these points, everyone is going to be able to relate (to Maire's story)."

Famie said Maire "was laid-back, funny, sarcastic." She loved country music, and with help from one of her doctors, she was secreted out of the hospital to a Kenny Chesney concert, where she met the singer backstage.

"We want to celebrate her life," Feist said. "We want laughter as well as tears."

Although she "had no trouble saying what was on her mind," Famie said Maire also "never wanted to hurt anybody's feelings." Despite suffering enormous pain from cancer and the treatments that did not cure her, he said she never complained.

"Maire faced the end of her life with bravery, with courage and with laughter," Feist said. "She could teach us all a few things."

Her doctor also shared thoughts on Facebook about the young woman she treated.

"Maire's journey starts as she continues to inspire us, touch our hearts and send her own personal message to all of us. ... Life is likely a mixture of fate and coincidence, but Maire has brought so many events and people together," Leja wrote.

Famie called Maire a “fire plug” for her spunk and spirit.

“She was intelligent, very articulate, very wise. ... She kind of had an old soul,” he said.

And she desperately longed to bring more attention to sarcoma cancer in the hopes of helping other patients.

To that end, U-M has established a fund in Maire’s name, the Maire Kent Memorial Fund for Sarcoma and Cardiac Tumor Research. The Million Dollar Maire initiative hopes to raise at least that amount from donations.

“Unfortunately, more than 14,000 people are diagnosed with sarcoma and nearly 6,000 patients pass away from this rare cancer each year,” said Bert E. Thomas IV, CEO of the Sarcoma Foundation of America, in a prepared statement. “Sharing Maire’s story with the world serves not only as a powerful tribute to her, but shines a light on this often forgotten cancer, helping to raise awareness for the thousands of patients like Maire who are in their own fight against sarcoma.”

Feist said that during filming, they encountered people who’d lost loved ones to cardiac sarcoma, including a woman whose brother had died only a week before she met the film crew, and another woman who lost her 5-year-old son to it.

“It’s such a lethal form of cancer,” Feist said. “That’s why we’re trying ... to help cure this dreaded disease.”

This fall, Famie’s series, “The Embrace of Aging” — about how women approach their later years — is slated to start airing on the Detroit PBS station. Although the main filming for “Maire’s Journey” had been completed at press time, Famie said they had some additional catch-up footage they needed to shoot over the next few months at U-M. Working on a low budget, he said they’re hoping to raise additional funds to complete the film; there’s a link to the crowd-funding site Indiegogo on the film’s website. Famie said they’d like to release a feature-length film next year, and ideally would love to be able to screen the documentary in some of the major film festivals.

“Maire’s story deserves those,” he said.

When the film is completed, Famie said they’d like the various premieres to also serve as fundraisers for families experiencing cancer. The filmmakers already are working closely with Gilda’s Club Metro Detroit.

As they were releasing Maire’s ashes into the New York Harbor, Famie said some of the ash residue blew into his camera. It was a physical reminder of her lasting presence in his life.

“I still haven’t wiped it off,” Famie said.

For more information, to see a trailer or to make a donation, visit the Maire’s Journey Facebook page or www.mairesjourney.com.