Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

Documentary shows retirees leading active lives

BY MATT COOPER

A documentary that started out as a play about retirement has brought the author out of retirement.

"101 Ways to Retire, or Not" is Sue Perlgut and Christopher Julian's look at retirement and our perceptions of it. The one-hour film follows the daily, active lives of eight retirees in Tompkins County.

Perlgut said the film was originally conceived as a play. After receiving a small grant from the Community Arts Partnership, she hired Julian to begin shooting background footage for her play.

"We were originally going to have the actors acting while the real person we interviewed would be shown on video behind them," she said.

However, Perlgut viewed only one interview and immediately changed her mind.

"I watched the first one and I turned to Chris and said 'This isn't a play, it's a documentary.'"

The pair spent several hours with each of the film's subject, shooting interviews and background footage. They covered a wide, colorful range of local retirees.

"None of us did the same things," Mary Ann Sumner, a subject in the documentary, said.

Sumner serves on the Dryden town board and met Perlgut through a book group. Sumner was tapped for the documentary and, upon viewing it on opening night, was surprised at the end result.

"Nobody expected it to turn out the way it did," she said. "It's very eye-opening and I think it's a good resource for anyone about to retire."

After "retiring" Mary Ann Sumner became involved in local politics, serving on the Dryden town board and running for town supervisor. She also cares for her horse Charlie, tends to her garden outside and maintains an active blog which includes detailed reports on the various town committees she serves on.

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Perlgut and Julian quickly became co-collaborators. Julian said that, while he had been involved in many documentaries before, this was the first project where he had such a large amount of creative control.

"It was an unusual collaboration," he said. "And I'm very happy with it."

Perlgut got the inspiration for the project while contemplating her own retirement.

"I was looking for a role model," she said. "I was also wondering who was out there and what people were doing with their lives after retirement."

What she discovered is that many of the active retirees she spoke with shared a similar, positive view of life.

"They were all happy to be alive," she said.

The film was also originally targeted at the aging baby boomer generation. Perlgut said that the film has transcended that audience and actually speaks to everyone.

"It starts a conversation between people, young and old alike," she said. "You may be 25 and realize you haven't considered your retirement, or it may make you think of your parents."

Between segments, the film features interviews with a large variety of people on the streets of Ithaca. Julian said that particular segment is noteworthy because it reveals the average American's conceptions and misconceptions about retirement.

"It's a very timely issue," he said.

Perlgut and Julian took their movie on tour around Tompkins County, with various free showings in Trumansburg, Lansing and one scheduled for later this month at 7 p.m., Sept. 29 in the Danby town hall. They said the movie's reception has been overwhelmingly positive.

"It's been outstanding," Perlgut said.

Both said that the movie's prevailing sense of humor was often a big crowd pleaser

"People were roaring with laughter at parts," Julian said. "Many parts, actually."

As for the film's effect on the filmmakers, Perlgut has come out of retirement and established a steady collaboration with Julian.

"I've discovered I love the process of making documentaries," she said. "Julian and I have three more projects in the works."

Perlgut's next project, a senior strength training video titled "Stay Strong, Life for Life," is scheduled for release in late October.