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Surviving life's changes

By Chris Jackett
STAFF WRITER

Keith Famie is a Novi resident with a large range of activities on his resume, many of which have been televised for public viewing.

Famie, 47, has been in the public eye for nearly 20 years, but may be remembered most for placing third on the CBS reality show "Survivor II: The Australian Outback" in 2001. His already impressive resume helped catapult him into the spotlight after appearing on "Survivor," and he hasn't slowed down one bit, producing two "reality-based documentaries" set to debut on WXYZ-TV (Channel 7) this month and others earning him three Emmys in the past.

Before "Survivor"

After graduating from Farmington High School in 1978, Famie moved to Europe to work with well-known chefs in Monte Carlo, Belgium and Brussels.

"I was never a scholastic person," he said of his jump from high school into the cooking world.

He returned to Michigan three years later as chef de cuisine at Chez Raphael in Novi's Sheraton Oaks Hotel, where he worked for five years while living in an apartment across from Twelve Oaks Mall.

Gaining Chez Raphael many awards during his tenure as chef, Famie acted on his long-time dream to open his own restaurant, Les Auteurs in Royal Oak, in 1988.

The restaurant was an immediate hit, earning praise as one of the best new restaurants in the country from Esquire magazine and gaining Famie recognition as one of the 10 best new chefs of the year in 1989 from Food & Wine magazine.

After adding a New Orleans-style jazz club called Madison's adjacent to Les Auteurs in 1991, Famie decided to close Les

Auteurs and reopen it as western-themed Durango Grill the following year.

Two years later, "Famie's Adventures in Cooking" debuted on local television stations, a show that followed the chef around as he traveled in search of great recipes.

Picking up speed, Famie sold Durango Grill and opened Forte restaurant in Birmingham in 1996, again gaining praise as one of the best new restaurants in the country from Esquire magazine.

In 1997, Famie began to get involved with the Rainbow Connection, a nonprofit organization raising money for children with life-threatening illnesses. He served as the president of the organization at one time.

Famie's current mainstay is Visionalist Entertainment, a reality-based documentary production company he founded in 1998, the same year he left Forte to focus on his television show.

"To dream is to fantasize. To visualize is to expect," Famie said. "If it's in my head and clear, I can do it. Once the idea's in my head, I'm screwed because then I'm a fanatic and I have to do it."

The first project Visionalist produced was "From Hanoi to China Beach: A Taste of the Exotic," when Famie biked through Vietnam in 1999 with three Vietnam War veterans.

This led into Famie's participation on "Survivor" in 2000, which aired on CBS in 2001.

"The 'Survivor' thing was a big deal. It was two months with no communication with anyone, not even family," Famie said. "For now, I'm an individual that really doesn't know what course my life will take. It's a safe bet you won't find me behind a grill sautéing a piece of salmon anytime soon. It's a different medium. It's not expression through film, through telling stories. At my age, I feel I'm providing a great value to society. Their life is immortalized on screen. It's hard to explain the gratitude I get from that."

After "Survivor"

Riding high on the success of "Survivor," "Famie's Adventures in Cooking" took to the Food Network for 32 episodes while Famie published a book by the same name in 2001.

Continuing his work with the show and Visionalist Entertainment, Famie wrote "You Really Haven't Been There Until You've Eaten the Food" in 2003, traveling the globe and a few corners of the United States in search of quality recipes.

That same year, his involvement with the Rainbow Connection led him to work with the Leukemia/Lymphoma society to participate in the international IRONMAN triathlon to benefit 9-year-old Adam Rose. It took Famie 16 hours and 28 minutes, but, on Oct. 18, 2003, he finished the race, calling it the "longest day of his life."

"I came back from Hawaii with the IRONMAN medal they give you for completing the race and, my dad was in the hospital, and I put it around his neck."

Famie's dad, a World War II veteran, passed away on Dec. 2, 2004. Of all the events in Famie's life, this was what really hit him the most.

"When my dad died and I held his hand and he took his last breath... I did 'Survivor' and IRONMAN and cooked for two presidents. When my dad died, I wasn't shook up... I was annoyed. I thought, 'This is it? A guy, who busted his ass off, never had a newspaper article about him. What the (heck). I started thinking about things differently,' Famie said. "I'm an optimistic person. I've gone through a lot of

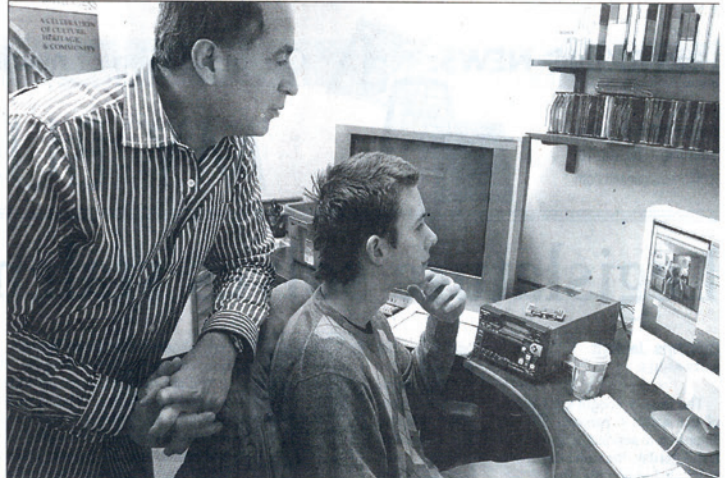


Photo by JOHN HEIDER/Novi News

Keith Famie, left, checks out a video documentary in progress with editor Ben Logan.

(stuff). When it's over, it's over. I go by the motto 'Do good and good will come.'

With the one regret of never capturing his father's stories on camera, Famie went on to focus in on projects with Visionalist Entertainment. In 2005, he produced "Ice Warriors," a documentary following the Red Wings Alumni team through Russia.

After sharing lunch breaks with Bill Damas and hearing his stories about life in Greece, Famie went on to begin the "Our Story Of" series. His first two projects, originally titled "Rags to Riches" after his meetings with Damas, were focused in on the Italian and Polish cultures.

"Our Italian Story" won three Emmys, which sit on a shelf behind Famie's fourth floor desk.

His Vietnam and Red Wings documentaries were also nominated for a total of three Emmys, but did not win.

Following the success of the first two documentaries last year, Famie spent much of 2007 directing and producing Greek and Arab American reality-based documentaries. He said the hardest part was condensing 70-90 hours of footage into a 58-minute block

to air commercial free on WXYZ-TV (Channel 7) this month.

Famie is already hard at work on the next group of documentaries. The "Our Story Of" series will venture into the Japanese Jewish and Indian cultures for next fall as Famie also works on two side projects about Arab American doctors and "seeing in the dark," what it's like to be blind.