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## Movies help to overcome disability

At a critical moment in his difficult early years, Adrian Esposito of Brighton was rescued by the movies. Before this, Esposito, who is 19, had lived a life marked by frustration and disappointment.



**Esposito**

Diagnosed at age 8 with Asperger syndrome, a disability on the autism spectrum of disorders, he had had trouble with reading and math; he had difficulty keeping his emotions under control. And then one day, Adrian was watching a movie with his mother,



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Kristina Nomeika.

"He understood it perfectly," Nomeika says, remembering how her son was transfixed by the action in the film.

Seizing an opportunity, she introduced him to more and more movies, as well as books on film.

"When kids have disabilities, the

way to reach them is to see what they are interested in and then you go with that," she says.

"You just keep widening the circle so their learning is enhanced, so their mind is awakened."

Inspired by his love of film, Esposito began to take classes at The Animation Workshop at Animatus Studio in Rochester when he was 12 years old.

This study opened a door for him. He had found a way to express himself using the vocabulary and the medium of film.

His first major project there was an animated film on apartheid in

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South Africa. The project took more than a year to complete, as Esposito had to draw more than 600 panels.

Recently, he completed a second project, a documentary film that was more than two years in the making.

Called *Aging Trees of Knowledge*, the film documents the lives of five survivors of World War II, one of them Esposito's grandmother, Janina Nomeika.

"I wanted to preserve history so people can learn from it, so history won't repeat itself," Esposito says.

In the film, Janina Nomeika, now a resident of St. John's Home in Rochester, describes a time of fear and anxiety, a time of extraordinary personal bravery in her native Lithuania when it was occupied by Germany during World War II.

The other stories echo those themes, recalling in the subjects' own words times of courage both in Nazi Germany and Japanese-occupied China.

Esposito's mother wrote the scripts for the project, and she narrates the segment on her mother. Rochester actor Reuben Joseph Tapp narrates the other segments.

**What:** A showing of the first segment of Adrian Esposito's film *Aging Trees of Knowledge*. It tells the story of Janina Nomeika, Esposito's grandmother, and her time in German-occupied Lithuania during World War II.

**When:** Oct. 29, 7 p.m.

**Where:** St. John's Home auditorium, 150 Highland Ave., Rochester.

**Cost:** Free and open to the public.

**Information:** Call (585) 271-5413.

**Future showings:** Another segment of the film will be shown on Nov. 24 at 9:15 p.m. at the Little Theatre, 240 East Ave., Rochester. Cost: \$5.

Esposito spent hours upon hours interviewing his subjects. And he spent an extraordinary amount of time finding the right historical film clips and still photographs, as well as the right music, to give the film resonance and historical accuracy.

Then there were long days and nights editing at the computer, piecing the parts of the puzzle together to produce a seamless, visually arresting and engrossing product.

"Boy, Adrian perseveres," says Fred Armstrong, one of Esposi-

to's mentors at Animatus. "It's impressive that he's so determined."

Armstrong also notes that Esposito's themes as a filmmaker make a consistent statement, whether he's looking at apartheid or genocide or race relations, his next subject.

"It's all about treating people with respect and with dignity," Armstrong says.

Armstrong credits Esposito for following his dream, but he also credits Kristina Nomeika for helping her son realize his dream.

"I fear that kid would be stuck there sitting by himself had it not been for her," he says.

Having graduated from the Monroe BOCES No. 1 EMCC program in radio and television broadcasting, Esposito is now in the BOCES transition program in Brighton.

A segment was shown during the Little Theatre's Emerging Filmmakers series last month.

The segment on his grandmother will be shown at St. John's Home on Oct. 29.

Esposito is pleased that his work is reaching a wider audience, and he hopes his success will inspire others.

"It means to me that people with Asperger's can achieve their goals if they want to, if they're determined to do it," he says. □