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Two Extraordinary Lamorinda Women Direct and Produce Two CAIFF Films

By *Sophie Braccini*



Two films by Lamorinda residents Laura Cryan Zellmer and Ellie Marks will be featured in the Sept. 11-14 California Independent Film Festival. The two ladies are fighters, but the circumstances that led them to become a movie director and a producer of the films "Breathe in Life" and "Mobilize" are a testimony to their courage and resilience.

Zellmer was 16 months old when her cystic fibrosis diagnosis was confirmed. Doctors were not sure she would live past childhood; today the median life expectancy for those who suffer from this incurable disease that affects the lungs and digestive system is 37. Zellmer is 39. The movie she directed, "Breathe in Life," is a letter to her 6-year-old son, Everett. It tells her story.

"When I was a child I thought that I might not live past my early 20s, so as I thought I was not going to be here for long, I decided to do as many

"Mobilize" Images provided

things as possible, enjoy the beauty around me, and not take anything for granted," says Zellmer. Her parents moved to California from New York in part because they were told that warmer air would be good for her. She attended school here, went to UC San Diego where the salty warm ocean air was therapeutic. When she came back to Lamorinda 15 years ago, she decided to film herself, to show what cystic fibrosis was.

"Then in 2006 I got really sick and started recording interviews; then I got better and found out I was pregnant. The [focus] then became writing a letter to my son, telling him my story and what I have learned," she says. With her friend Amy Janes, she started working on the documentary, learning new techniques as she went along. The movie was released earlier this year and was selected by CAIFF for this year's festival. It will be shown at 4 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 14 at the Rheem Theatre, along with the documentary "Project Happiness." At this time, the showing is sold out. "I am so blessed to have such a support here," says Zellmer. CAIFF staff confirmed that there would be a few rush tickets available on the day of the presentation at Rheem.

Zellmer says the documentary will also be shown at other film festivals and at fundraisers for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation before being made public online. Today Zellmer is cautiously optimistic. "I feel like a cat," she says, "so many times I have been so sick that I thought I was close to the end, but I came back." Recently, new medication has been developed to protect young patients from the damage Zellmer suffered; she hopes that a breakthrough is close for patients with her type of cystic fibrosis. "I try not to think about it much, and to live one day at a time," she says. "Sometimes our struggles can become a gift."

In Lafayette, Ellie Marks was confronted with another type of challenge. In 2008 her husband Alan Marks, a realtor with Alain Pinel in Orinda, was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor that his doctors attributed to his 20 years of cell phone usage. Marks was not familiar with the issue at the time, but as her husband started treatment and began the road to recovery, she researched the science behind the allegations linking cancer with cell phones.

"If you look in your iPhone under Settings, General, About, Legal, RF Exposure, you can read 'Carry iPhone at least 10mm away from your body to ensure exposure levels remain at or below the as-tested levels,'" says Marks. She was so alarmed by what she discovered after meeting with local

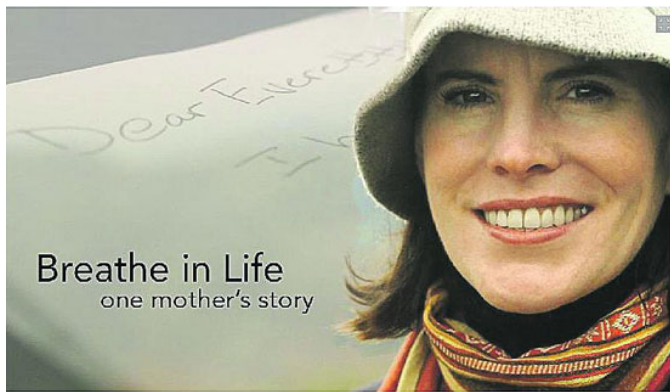
and international scientists that she founded the California Brain Tumor Association and started a campaign for transparency and precaution, especially for children whose brains absorb radiation at a much higher rate than adults. Marks has testified to Congress on the health risks of cell phones and has appeared on the Dr. Oz Show, Larry King Live, and many national newscasts. The movie "Mobilize" that she co-produced is an effort to reach as many people as possible.

"We are not telling people to stop using their phones, they have become so ubiquitous," she says, "but to take precautions like not sleeping next to them, using earphones to speak on the phone and [putting phones] in airplane mode as often as possible." She also asks parents to be cautious with kids using iPads and not stream off the Internet.

There will be a panel discussion at 1 p.m. Friday, Sept. 12 after the documentary screening, with Joel M. Moskowitz, Ph.D., director and principal investigator for the Center for Family and Community Health in Berkeley, Kevin Kunze, the director of "Mobilize," and special guest Rep. Andrea Boland of Maine, who fought for four years to get a cell phone "right to know" bill passed in Maine.

"After the panel Q&A with the audience we will have an after party at Rheem," says Marks.

For more information about the movies and the 2014 California Independent Film Festival, go to CAIFF.org.



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