

A story that should be told

KEITH FAMIE'S 'OUR VIETNAM GENERATION' EXPLORES A PAINFUL CHAPTER IN U.S. HISTORY



Vietnam veteran Ralph Gapuz of Highland poses for a photo after filming a segment on the Tet Offensive for Keith Famie's Vietnam documentary.

Events linked to Fox gala

Here's a closer look at some of the movies and events linked to the Friday debut of "Our Vietnam Generation" at the Fox Theatre. ■ Keith Famie's short film "One Soldier's Story" will be shown as part of the "Our Vietnam Generation" event. It's about Army Sgt. Michael Ingram Jr. of Newport, who was killed in Afghanistan last year. Through interviews with his family and friends, the movie profiles a remarkable young man. ■ The Michigan Vietnam Veteran Traveling Memorial will be displayed at the Fox Theatre on Friday and then move to the Detroit Historical Museum on Saturday, where it will stay until Feb. 13. The memorial includes the names of the state's 2,654 casualties. The display is free to veterans and their families. For more information, call the Detroit Historical Museum at 313-833-1805 or go to www.detroithistorical.org. ■ Another film from Famie and his Visionalist Entertainment Productions, "Can You See How I See?" is being shown at the Birmingham 8 theater in downtown Birmingham at 7 p.m. Saturday. The 110-minute movie explores what it's like to be blind. Capt. Ivan Castro, the only blind Special Forces officer currently on active duty, is among those profiled in the movie and will be at the screening. Castro is also appearing at the "Our Vietnam Generation" event. Tickets are \$20. Call 248-869-0096 to reserve seats.

By JULIE HINDS
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Keith Famie is sitting in his office in Wixom, a room filled with memorabilia, photos and eight of the nine local Emmys his films have won. A huge dry-erase board dominates the wall opposite his desk. On it is the lineup for the Friday event at the Fox Theatre that has become a labor of love for him.

"It's going to be heavy," says the filmmaker of an evening that is sure to be deeply emotional. "But I was thinking the other night, it should be."

Famie is talking about the premiere of "Our Vietnam Generation," his film that pays tribute to Vietnam veterans in Michigan.

Fought in an age of social turmoil, the Vietnam War was a defining event for baby boomers — a politically divisive experience for the country at large and a personally devastating one for so many of the men and women who served there or lost loved ones.

The movie explores this painful chapter in American history through the words of those who lived it.

"I think it's a story that should be told. I think it might bring peace to a lot of the vets, especially," says Mark Spooner of Harrison Township, president of Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 9 Detroit. The Marine traveled back to Vietnam for the film with his daughter, Jennifer Spooner, who served as a Marine in Iraq.

Famie wants "Our Vietnam Generation" to give Vietnam veterans a voice about their past struggles and show how valuable they are to their communities. They're the caregivers for World War II's greatest generation. And they're helping make sure that today's troops are



Gapuz and filmmaker Keith Famie, right, discuss photos taken during Gapuz's tour of duty in Vietnam.

The 110-minute movie is edited down from about 110 hours of footage. An 82-minute version is set to air Feb. 21 on Detroit Public Television (WTVS-TV, Channel 56).

A CHALLENGING PROJECT

"Our Vietnam Generation" is the most demanding project that Famie has taken on as a director and producer. He's approached it with his characteristic enthusiasm and energy, which is more like overdrive. He describes how he calls his office at 1 a.m. to leave messages and keeps a pen by his bed to write down ideas at any time.

The 50-year-old former chef is probably best known to foodies for his late '80s, early '90s hotspot restaurant Les Auteurs in Royal Oak and his work as a chef at Forté in Birmingham. To fans of the CBS series "Survivor" he's Keith, the 2001 contestant who finished third during the Australian Outback season

Famie says the 2003 death of his father — a World War II bombardier — prompted him to think about life and develop the idea of doing a documentary about the Italian immigrant experience in Detroit — a concept that became "Our Italian Story." He also did films about the Greek, Polish, Indian and Arab-American communities.

In 2009 at the Fox Theatre, he debuted "Detroit: Our Greatest Generation," a tribute to World War II veterans inspired by his dad, the senior citizens he met while making the immigrant experience films and Detroit's famous role as the arsenal of democracy.

That project introduced him to many Vietnam veterans and was one of the things that sparked "Our Vietnam Generation." His work on it started rather spontaneously in September 2009, when he was driving by the Oakland Hills Memorial Gardens in Novi and saw some

held every year for the National POW-MIA Recognition Day at the "Michigan Remembers" POW-MIA Memorial.

Over the months that followed, Famie — whose brother served in Vietnam — did one-on-one interviews with about 45 people and talked to dozens more at special events. He introduced himself to Vietnam veterans groups and shot footage of everyone from the veterans to legendary counterculture figure John Sinclair and former anchorman Bill Bonds to piece together the film story.

Making the film was a long, expensive process that required holding fund-raisers and gathering contributions from several sponsors. A few months ago, according to Famie, he was worried that he wouldn't have the financing to finish the work and stage the Fox gala. Then Bob Gillette, the founder of the American House senior living communities and a key support-

he already had — enough to keep the project going.

Gillette, who traveled to France with Famie for "Detroit: Our Greatest Generation" and has accompanied him on many shoots for "Our Vietnam Generation," says about \$250,000 came from him and various American House entities to support both movies.

"From a business standpoint, these things don't make any sense," says Gillette. But, he continues, it makes sense from a humanitarian standpoint, as a way to honor veterans, especially the several hundred who live at American House residences.

Famie says Tyrone Chatman, who's in the film and is executive director of the Michigan Veterans Foundation/Detroit Veterans Center, will bring 13 homeless Vietnam vets outfitted with new clothes to the Fox event, thanks to a donation from Gillette.

AN EXTRAORDINARY NIGHT

Using the same impresario skills that it takes to run a restaurant, Famie has put together a lineup for the film debut at the Fox that will include a VIP reception, appearances by the Cornerstone Middle School Concert Choir, singer Stewart Franke and the 126th Army Band of the Michigan National Guard, a short film about a fallen soldier who served in Afghanistan, comments from dignitaries and a candlelight vigil accompanied by the Perfecting Church's choir.

During it, the names of the 2,654 Vietnam casualties from Michigan will scroll down the screen. The names of casualties from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars will also appear.

Famie will be working until the guests arrive on Friday and through the night. "It's 24/7," he says. "It's constantly thinking about it, calling on it. You're always trying to connect dots. You want the night at the Fox to be sensational. They've (Vietnam veterans) never had a night like this ever, so it's got to be extraordinary."

The range of stories in the movie hits home with many different people and groups. It features women like Elizabeth Allen of Ann Arbor, who was an Army nurse in Pleiku at the time of the Tet Offensive.

Allen says people don't recognize that the pain of the conflict still lingers. "I was on a talk show once and she says, 'Well, why don't you all just forget about it and go on?'" says Allen. "And that actually is the opinion of people who don't know anything about war."

Marty Eddy, president of the Prisoner of War Committee of Michigan, says she's glad that Famie is including the POW-MIA issue. "Our Vietnam Generation" has moving interviews with relatives like Arthur Masucci, whose brother Martin Masucci has been missing in action since 1965.

"Everyone has a story and it's really an important story," says Eddy.

On a day late last year, Famie is at the Highland home of Vietnam veteran Ralph Gapuz to film him describing the Tet Offensive. Gapuz is already in the movie. Early on in the film, he's one of the people who, in a series of quick clips, state that they're Vietnam veterans.

Vietnam veterans are "brothers and sisters forever," says Gapuz on this day. "It will never change. We're bonded like a

'Our Vietnam Generation' premiere

Doors open at 6:30 p.m. Fri.; event begins at 7:30
Fox Theatre
2211 Woodward, Detroit
313-983-6611
\$25 and \$35
Tickets are available through
Ticketmaster, the Fox box office or
at 248-869-0096