

Finding the sweet spot: Movie Monday organizer debuts his own film

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After almost two decades screening films at Movie Monday

Canada's Coat of Arms is not very Canadian.

There are no lions or unicorns in Canada as depicted in the heraldic emblem, points out 86-year-old Bob Choma, sitting on his bed barefoot, still a sharp wit.

Choma's own playful hand-drawn reinterpretations are posted to the walls of his room at Sunset Lodge. Magazine cutouts, photographs and his own art join the collage.

He is a man of audacious ideas and imagination, with a persuasive personality.

His life bears more than one resemblance to that of Frank Abagnale, which inspired the Leonardo DiCaprio film *Catch Me If You Can*.

During a drunken escapade in the Second World War, Choma took a plane for a joy ride. He's also been to prison for engraving a bank note (just to see if he could — not to actually counterfeit money).

“When I got out, I did money orders for every bank in Canada,” he says.

As a child, he studied under the Group of Seven, taught creativity courses at universities, and ran large graphic design companies.

But those were the good, manic times.

There's also been low times: alcoholism, bankruptcy and attempted suicides.

Just like Abagnale, Choma's life has inspired a film, debuting this month.

His long-time friend, Bruce Saunders, began filming the documentary 17 years ago. At the time, Choma was “totally depressed, in hospital ... he was just waddling around barely able to smile or talk,” Saunders recalls.

As Choma started to recover, an idea for an art project inspired him: to create 20 brightly-painted sculptures out of driftwood and display them at the Moss Street Paint-In.

On the big day, in 1994, Saunders grabbed a video camera to capture the event. But the one-day triumph turned out to be just the beginning. Over the years, Saunders added more and more interviews with Choma and his wife.

“The more I found out about him, the more fascinating he became,” he says.

The two met in a support group for people with bipolar disorder in the early 1990s. The disorder (Saunders prefers the term condition) is characterized by periods of severe depression, followed by periods of extreme elation or irritability called mania.

Many people with bipolar condition are very creative, says Saunders, of *Movie Monday* fame.

For almost two decades, Saunders has hosted the popular movie night, aimed at sparking debate about mental illness, and the way it's portrayed in the movies.

Filmmakers too often end their struggling characters' lives with a "tidy jump off the bridge," he argues in his online posts. "When screenwriters don't choose more positive endings for their protagonists, we, as people with illnesses that come with a fair dollop of hopelessness built in, are encouraged to accept suicide as an appropriate end."

In ChomaVision, Saunders gets the chance to change the narrative. His film is primarily a celebration of Choma's art and creativity.

The project has also been a personal journey for Saunders.

"I'm not a filmmaker," he admits. "I've struggled with it every winter, all these years, to try to get a handle on it ... Something would come up or I'd just get defeated by it, and for my own mental health, I'd have to step away from it."

Finally, he got partnered with the right guy in Jay Carr to help him edit the film. For the past six weeks, the two have been racing against time, and incompatible computer systems, to meet the deadline.

The film debuted in Vancouver this weekend at an event celebrating creativity in people with bipolar disorder, hosted by a research team from the University of B.C.

The celebration comes on the heels of groundbreaking research by members of the team, dubbed Collaborative RESearch Team to study psychosocial issues in Bipolar Disorder.

The research provides an examination of treatment for the disorder that acknowledges the high rates of creativity in this population.

Creative professions, which often involve irregular hours, substance misuse, lack of public recognition and financial stress, may aggravate symptoms, it concludes.

At the same time, patients may resist treatments whose goal is "restoring normalcy," or to stabilize their mood. "Many clients believe that their creative accomplishments are fostered by high periods ... so such beliefs are worth carefully evaluating," write authors Greg Murray and Sheri Johnson.

Saunders can relate.

When he launched Movie Mondays, while hospitalized after a suicide attempt, his wife cautioned him to take it slow.

"People (with bipolar disorder) are more manageable when they are slightly depressed," he says. "Their families are more comfortable with them a little depressed, and so are the doctors."

The problem, he says, is if you medicate away the creativity, people might just give up.

“Most people would die to have that kind of energy and quick thinking. You just have to be careful about how you use it.”

The key, he says, is finding the sweet spot, “where you’re being creative, but you’re not going off the top end with a huge manic high, and then falling into depression.”

Launching a film has been a risk but Saunders says it has paid off.

While the film’s taken way longer than planned, the delays may be a blessing in disguise.

Instead of simply portraying a snapshot of Choma’s “day in the sun” at the Moss Street art show, the film follows him through his senior years. The driftwood sculptures have since rotted in the backyard, but Choma’s life on film ends on an exuberant note, with him leading a singalong with a booming voice.

Choma has already seen the rough cut.

“It’s kind of peculiar,” he says of the experience. “I didn’t think I was that way they have me in the movie ... I just go on doing things, in my life – unusual things – and I think nothing of it, but somebody turns around and says, ‘Ah! Fantastic!’”

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