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NEW FILM ASKS IF BOOMERS REALLY WANT TO KNOW THEIR PARENTS

Earlier this year, **Ageing Today** received a preview DVD of a remarkable feature documentary by Doug Block titled *51 Birch Street*. Soon after the film's somewhat prosaic home-video lensing around Block's parents' home, the production begins to take a series of unexpected—sometimes stunning—twists and turns. More than most documentaries we receive delineating the issues of growing old, *51 Birch Street* tells the story of aging, of family, of intergenerational conflict, of marriage, of betrayal, of bereavement, of late-life romance and of emotional growth at any age. Recently, we witnessed a warm and enthusiastic reception for *51 Birch Street* at a film festival in San Francisco, echoing the response to the documentary at festivals internationally, according to many articles and positive reviews.

This fall, the film is being given a rare theatrical release for a documentary feature in selected cities around the United States, and in spring 2007 it will be screened on HBO, which backed the film. Block also plans to speak at the 2007 Joint Conference of the American Society on Aging and National Council on Aging in Chicago, March 7–10, in a session titled “Boomers in Focus: Filmmakers Turn the Lens on Their Parents—And Themselves.” To learn more about *51 Birch Street*, including information on noncommercial distribution, visit the website at www.51BirchStreet.com.

In the following article, written exclusively for **Ageing Today**, filmmaker Doug Block describes how this production evolved from what began as home video.

—Paul Kleyman, Editor
Ageing Today

By DOUG BLOCK

51 Birch Street is a film I never set out to make. I mean, who in their right mind would choose to delve into some of the most personal aspects of their parents' relationship, much less reveal it for public consumption?

Although I'm a documentary filmmaker by profession, making this one was the farthest thing from my mind three years ago when I visited our suburban family home in Port Washington, N.Y., for the last time. Yes, I did bring my digital camcorder with me, but it was just to capture the house I grew up in for posterity. Or so I thought.

SUDDEN AND SHOCKING

A lot had happened in the previous year. First, my mother, whom I was always very close to, died without warning after a short illness. Then, three months later, my father, with whom I'm not as close, called from Florida to announce he was moving in with his secretary of 40 years ago, Kitty. They quickly married, sold the house and now were about to leave the area for good. It was all pretty shocking in its suddenness—especially seeing my emotionally distant dad acting like a rejuvenated man.

Everyone thought my parents' 54-year marriage had been ideal, but when Dad and Kitty became husband and wife, they held a kiss for an embarrassingly long 12 seconds. I wasn't the only one who began to wonder.

Still, I was philosophical about it and told my two older sisters, “Dad’s 83 and, hey, good for him. He’s moving forward, life marches on, and all that.” None of us relished the idea of him living all alone in that big house. Then I walked inside the house, saw our entire family history being packed away in boxes and it all hit me like a punch in the stomach. Although I hadn’t lived there in well over 30 years, on some very primal level I still thought of *51 Birch Street* as my home.

I knew my mother had kept a journal, but I wasn’t prepared for finding three large cartons filled with her daily diaries going back 35 years. She left no instructions about what to do with them, and, while no one was anxious to read them, none of us could bring themselves to throw them out, either.

SILENT DADS

It soon became apparent that my father, who is from that World War II generation of men who were generally silent about themselves, was not merely willing but eager to talk. I found that my camera was facilitating the conversation by allowing me to ask the difficult questions I could never have broached otherwise. If I didn’t yet envision a film, I did recognize a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get to know my father better, so I decided to keep coming back.

It was during the next visit that I asked my dad, offhandedly, if he missed Mom “No,” he replied. “It wasn’t a loving association, just a functioning one.” I was stunned. Yet that was also the moment the documentary filmmaker in me knew I had a larger, more universal story to tell, one that might resonate powerfully with many other people struggling to make sense of their parental relationships.

At the house, I pored over the thousands of photos and slides my father, a photo hobbyist, had taken over the years, as well as a number of rolls of 8mm home movies he’d shot back in the early 1950s. Later, back in my New York City office, 45 minutes away, I started to review the many hours of footage and interviews I’d shot with my parents over the years. Originally, the interviews were only meant for my sisters and me to have as records of our family history. But now that I was seeing these images in a different context, it was amazing how obvious my parents’ unhappiness was—and how oblivious I was to it at the time.

Back at the house again, moving day was fast approaching and my father was continuing to open up to me. Would we be able to reach a genuine connection and closeness before it was too late? Then there were those boxes of my mother’s diaries. For a long time I wrestled over whether I should read them, and even longer over whether to include them in the film. In the end, I realized that although they may reveal some painful family secrets, they might also answer many questions and give voice to her side of the story. With an equal measure of fascination and dread, I began sifting through one diary page after another.

BOMBHELLS

The business of making independent documentaries requires considerably more than perseverance and a good story. In that regard, I was very fortunate to have HBO show their faith in me as a filmmaker and come on board early as the principal backer of this project. Once that happened, my greatest challenge during the many months of editing was how to depict the diary pages onscreen. My mother was a very complicated person, and I wanted to pick just the right words and phrases to do her justice, yet not overstep the bounds of propriety. I felt an enormous responsibility and burden. Then, too, the diaries contained a number of bombshells, and I was plagued by the thought of whether or not my mother would have wanted her inner self revealed so publicly.

During that time, I hoped there would somehow be a wide audience for my very personal documentary. But my family wasn’t nearly as convinced, even after they saw an early rough cut and all agreed, to my immeasurable relief, that it was both fair and truthful. I’ll always remember that, as we were entering the theater for *51 Birch Street*’s world-premiere screening at the prestigious Toronto Film Festival, my oldest sister, Ellen, openly wondered who on earth could possibly be interested in a film about our boring family. Ninety minutes later, as we all stood on stage basking in a rapturous ovation that echoed through the sold-out 400-seat theater, we had our answer.

Since then, *51 Birch Street* has been warmly received at more than two dozen film festivals all over the world, and the film will open in theaters in New York, Los Angeles and a half-dozen other cities starting Oct. 18. It’s thrilling, of course, to have a successful film, but the greatest outcome is how it has brought us closer together as a family. My father and Kitty often travel with the film and love speaking to audiences afterward. Dad has a message he’s particularly passionate about: No matter how old you are, it’s never too late to change your life for the better and find happiness.

NOT THERAPY

Throughout the process, any number of people have asked whether the film was therapeutic for me. “Not really,” I’d say. “Therapy is where you go once a week for 50 minutes, and it costs maybe a hun-

dred bucks a pop.” During the two years of making *51 Birch Street*, I thought about my parents all day long. I thought about them as I’d lie in bed at night. They invaded my dreams. As for the cost of a feature documentary, let’s just say it’s not cheaper than therapy, to say the least.

Looking back on it, though, I now appreciate that making this film has been a priceless experience: to be able to understand both of my parents better—to be able to honor their lives and pay tribute to them as fallible human beings who did the best they could—to get so much closer to my father—to gain closure with my past. This film wasn’t easy to make, by any means, but I feel very blessed to have been given the opportunity.

My greatest hope with *51 Birch Street* is that, over time, it will continue to resonate universally, and that, just maybe, it will inspire others to reach out and talk with their own parents—not that doing so will resolve things, necessarily. As the film strongly suggests, we never really resolve things with our parents. But if we’re lucky, we get the chance to make peace with them before it’s too late. ❖