

Pittsburgh-area family shares autism story in film

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By Michael A. Fuoco / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Two men stand in a kitchen discussing how hectic it is to take their sons to sports practices. The camera zooms in on another man. He says nothing because he can't join in the conversation. His two sons don't have sports practices because they have autism.

The scene in which silence says everything about the isolation of autism is one of many poignant moments in a new feature-length documentary "The Family Next Door" that focuses on the Lund family of Upper St. Clair. Shot over 16 months in 2011-12, the film explores how the family dynamic is formed by the members' challenges, grace and determination in dealing with the autism of Donny, 14, who is high functioning, and Brian, 7, who is nonverbal.

The effect on the boys and on other family members — parents Don and Donna, a former teacher and a Pittsburgh lawyer, respectively; and their other children, Nikki, 17, and Catie, 12 — is presented in a style familiar to TV viewers of reality shows, a combination of cinema verite, voiceovers and characters breaking the fourth wall by speaking directly into the camera. What emerges is a portrait of one family's love, sadness, joy, honesty, humor, frustration and acceptance.

The documentary will premier at a screening at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Phoenix Big Cinemas Chartiers Valley in Collier near Bridgeville (where Donny works as a ticket taker). Admission is free and donations to the Autism Society of Pittsburgh will be accepted. Tickets are available only by emailing hness@autismsocietypgh.org.

"The movie shows what it's like to live in a family that deals with autism," said Barry Reese of Upper St. Clair, who wrote, directed and produced the film with Mike Messner. The two men also helped produce the 2013 film "The Last Gladiators," a documentary about National Hockey League "enforcers."

"We hope that at a minimum anyone who sees [The Family Next Door] has a better understanding of what the challenges are for a family that has a member with autism," Mr. Reese said. "We also

hope other kids learn to be more understanding and empathetic when dealing with kids with autism and that families with similar issues realize that they are not alone.”

What will become of “The Family Next Door” after its screening Wednesday is anyone’s guess, Mr. Reese said.

“In a perfect world, hopefully as many people will see it as possible. It was a passion project, and the No. 1 aim really was to create more awareness about the emotions surrounding autism. You don’t know how many people will respond to the film and whether it will be a purely educational film or one that finds its way into the mainstream.”

Mr. Reese, a friend of the Lunds, got the idea for the movie after seeing Donny walking in circles one morning and asked Donna why. She explained Donny was getting ready for the day and that he performed the ritual daily. Impressed with Donny’s courage to daily try to navigate the “typical world,” Mr. Reese pitched to the Lunds the idea of documenting the family’s life.

They initially rejected the idea but eventually relented, Donna Lund said, “because the more we thought about it, the intention was never to showcase our family but was a more overarching mission to show people what kids like Donny go through. Brian’s issues are on the surface but Donny’s are a little bit deeper because of what he has to go through to try to be part of the world.

“I think a little knowledge goes a long way. When we put it all together, we thought maybe as a unit we could show people in similar situations that they are not alone and give other people who don’t understand autism an opportunity to learn about it and maybe the world will be a better place.”

That’s not to say there wasn’t trepidation once filming began. Donna Lund wondered what she had gotten herself in to but eventually found the process to be therapeutic. Youngest daughter Catie refused to cooperate in the principal filming but in a powerful yet brief appearance in an epilogue shot two years later emerges as a thoughtful, proud, mature sister to Donny and Brian.

Donna Lund, who has seen the movie’s final cut, is pleased with how the film turned out.

“When I see the movie, I’m really proud of my family, I’m really proud of my kids. I think they’re all stepping up to the plate,” she said. “I think the most important thing in this movie is we don’t think we’re special. We just think we have challenges like a lot of people. Hopefully, this will be for the greater good of the autism community. This isn’t about us. We’re just the vehicle, really.”

As for her family, “I think we’re getting better. I think there’s a whole world out there to explore for Donny. I don’t know what he’s going to do after he finishes his last year of high school this year. But I

feel good. I feel Brian has come a long way. He's in a nonverbal reading program, and I'm seeing progress I never thought possible.

“They're a work in progress but their progress keeps me motivated.”