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YOU'RE LOOKING AT ME LIKE I LIVE HERE AND I DON'T
PREMIERES ON INDEPENDENT LENS ON THURSDAY, MARCH 29, 2012

***The Film Offers an Unforgettable Inside Look at Alzheimer's Disease
 Through the Eyes of Feisty Nursing Home Resident Lee Gorewitz***

(San Francisco, CA) — *You're Looking At Me Like I Live Here And I Don't* is a mesmerizing first-person account of Lee Gorewitz's life inside the Traditions Alzheimer's & Other Dementia Care Unit at the Reutlinger Community for Jewish Living in Danville, California. A total immersion into the fragmented day-to-day experience of the disease, the film reveals Lee's penetrating ruminations and charismatic vitality, shattering our preconceptions about Alzheimer's disease and aging. *You're Looking At Me Like I Live Here And I Don't*, a film by long-time elder activist Scott Kirschenbaum, will premiere on the Emmy® Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* on Thursday, March 29, 2012 at 10 PM (check local listings).

The Traditions Unit houses twenty residents, most of whom are shepherded by caregivers through scheduled activities such as balloon baseball and bingo. For them, life is routine. But for Lee Gorewitz, life is an odyssey. From the moment she wakes up, Lee wanders through the boundaries of the unit. Along her route, she gazes through windows, examines other residents' rooms, and strains to see outside the front entrance. An enigmatic outsider, Lee is on a quest for something that she can neither articulate nor comprehend; she is interested only in where her instincts guide her.

Drawn to family photographs scattered throughout her room, Lee is unable to identify herself in the pictures. Combing through the items in her closet, she mistakes an everyday outfit for her wedding dress. Seeking answers elsewhere, Lee finds a birthday card but cannot recognize that



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she is the “Mom” to whom the card is addressed. Exasperated and missing her children, Lee embraces a make-believe family of stuffed animals.

Although she lacks the ability to grasp memories, Lee’s attempts at recollection demonstrate unusual and poetic candor. Regarding her deceased husband, she professes, “How do I even say it? The air — was very good.” Considering love, she intones, “That’s a damn good thing to work with.” With a past that is out of reach, Lee turns her attention to her present surroundings.

When in good spirits, she is near angelic: consoling heartbroken women, kissing caregivers, and shaking a tail feather even after the music has stopped. But with no realistic option for leaving, Lee gives in to frustration. She argues with a tablemate during lunch, kicks a bouncy ball at a man’s legs, and unapologetically tells a sickly woman that she is going to die.

Widowed, cloistered, and slowly undone by her inability to think or speak clearly, Lee has every reason to succumb to the expectations of her conditions. Instead, she defies despondency. When she breaks down, she rebuilds. When she loses words, she summons emotions. And, despite the small defeats of her efforts, she remains an exceptional and resilient soul.

Immersed in the confounding logic of Alzheimer’s, Lee’s story adheres to the discordant, but never fully crippling rhythms of the disease. Here is one extraordinary woman who will not let us forget her — even as she struggles to remember herself.

To learn more about the film, and the issues involved, visit the companion website for *You’re Looking at Me Like I Live Here and I Don’t* at www.pbs.org/independentlens/url. Get detailed information on the film, watch preview clips, read an interview with the filmmaker, and explore the subject in depth with links and resources. The site also features a Talkback section where viewers can share their ideas and opinions.

DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

Upon initially visiting the Traditions Alzheimer’s & Other Dementia Care Unit I was greeted at the door by Lee Gorewitz. With the spry exuberance of a cruise director, she presented herself as a staff member, perhaps even the head of the Unit. She insisted on touring me around, and while we walked together she delivered a rambling soliloquy unlike anything I had ever heard before. I immediately realized the reality of her situation — she was not staff, but one of the residents.

For months on end, I visited with Lee in the hopes of understanding the inner pulse of her universe. Alzheimer’s disease had dissolved any reasonable sense of normalcy in Lee’s life, resulting in communication breakdown and uninhibited behavior, yet also, on occasion, a strange and unusual beauty. What struck me most was how, in the span of minutes, Lee would morph from pensive thinker to gregarious helper, from bubbly mover-and-shaker to morose and sometimes cruel instigator. My experience with Lee left me confounded. Who’s to say that Lee’s seemingly fragmented reality is any less valid than mine?

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There have been a handful of Alzheimer's-related films in the last five years, all of which privilege the lucid perspective of individuals living without the disease, like family members or doctors. I knew from the onset that this film needed to be different — it needed to be wholly about Lee's present-day existence within the walls of the Unit. Lee's life was, in essence, an Alzheimer's odyssey, a meandering string of transitory interactions and experiences. I wanted to help Lee tell her own story.

While making this film, I was regularly asked whether I find the subject matter depressing. Yes, this disease is terribly sad, but one of the enduring values of humanity is compassion, particularly with regard to our elders. If we sugarcoat or, worse yet, turn a blind eye to an important issue like Alzheimer's because it makes us uncomfortable, we will never understand its complexities or come to appreciate the role memory, family, knowledge, music, and language continue to play in the lives of sufferers. Though those with Alzheimer's might forget us, it seems unconscionable to forget about them.

The number of Americans age 65 and older is expected to grow from 39 million in 2008 to 72 million in 2030. As the population ages, Alzheimer's disease will affect more of us than ever before. Given this reality, we as a society must learn to more willingly engage with mental illness in ways that recognize the vulnerability of the mind while simultaneously appreciating the resiliency of the spirit. For Lee Gorewitz and the nineteen others, there is a rich world within the Traditions' Unit. *You're Looking At Me* endeavors to portray this world with all the humanity that it demands and deserves.

About the Filmmaker

Scott Kirschenbaum (Producer/Director) has long been an activist for the elderly, previously completing the documentary *Jumor: A Journey through Jewish Humor*, about the role of humor in Jewish nursing homes around the country. He has been commissioned to write profiles of the elderly for the *Yale Journal of Humanities in Medicine*, taught improv comedy to and performed stand-up comedy for nursing home residents across the country, and served as a personal assistant to a screenwriter suffering from Alzheimer's disease. A participant in the 2010-2011 San Francisco Film Society FilmHouse Residency, Kirschenbaum's projects include *A Soapbox In Haiti*, a speaker series that premiered on four major Haitian television stations on the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, and *Elementary Cool*, a short fiction film that premiered at Playworks' Play On Conference in Fall 2010 and was part of SFFS Youth Education's Filmmakers in the Classroom program. Kirschenbaum previously directed videos for the *San Francisco Chronicle* Season of Sharing Fund, Cookies for Kids' Cancer, StopWaste.Org, LifeTales, and Microsoft.

About Independent Lens

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about unique individuals, communities, and

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moments in history. Presented by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is supported by interactive companion websites and national publicity and community engagement campaigns. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts. The series producer is Lois Vossen.

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