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Our House
by
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Abstract

Our House is a documentary short film about the role personal archives play in our lives and how they are used to remember lost loved ones. Kevin Volk lost his father, Ernest, when he was just three years old. For years, his questions about Ernest were greeted with platitudes such as, “He would give the shirt off his back,” but very little substance. The film explores how family artifacts have given a window into the man who died of a heart attack at 46 years old and how it helped his son deal with the grief. The things we collect and discard are extensions of our memories both happy and sad. How the Volk family has dealt with personal items over the generations speaks to how each member handles loss of all kinds.

Ernest’s personal belongings over the decades were pushed into the back of closets and drawers until Kevin and his wife, Alina, made Ernest’s former house their home. Over the last 20 years they have uncovered photos, letters, films and personal memorabilia that belonged to Ernest and continue to find hidden items to this day. Alina believes that Ernest’s spirit guides them to find these things.

Project Description

It was Spring 2020, and we were in lockdown like most of the world. My husband, Kevin, our daughters, Sofia and Ruby, and I gathered together to watch the Disney film *Onward*. *Onward*, which tells the story of two brothers who use magic to bring their dead father back for one day but when things go wrong, only one of them can get a few precious

moments (Scanlon). Toward the end of the movie, I looked over at Kevin and saw it had landed emotionally on him.

Kevin's father passed away over 40 years ago and Kevin has always been envious that his older brother has memories of his father that he will never have. Kevin has no stories of his own to share and grew up knowing very little about his dad. This Disney movie had triggered something in him - the renewed feeling of loss and a grief that has not been fully processed.

Both Kevin and I grew up on Long Island, about three miles away from each other. Back in 2001, we were recently married and casually looking for a new home. It was before September 11th, and although home prices were steadily rising, it was still before the housing market really skyrocketed. His mother and stepfather had made the decision to retire to Florida and put their house on the market. Kevin wanted to buy it. I was lukewarm to the idea at best.

I understood Kevin's desire to keep the house in the family. His grandparents on his father's side had been the original owners and there was a nostalgia factor. At the time, I said the house for me only had three draws; proximity to the train, proximity to my parents, and that any ghosts would be friendly ghosts. I had no idea at the time how prescient that statement was.

Even though he had grown up in a house that had been his grandparents, Kevin had little relationship with that side of his family, and sparse knowledge about his father's youth. The house represented the last of that connection and letting it pass to strangers' hands would have been like severing those few ties completely. Then, one evening we got a call that Kevin's stepfather had had a stroke. When we left the hospital after a long night in the ER, I

Scanlon, Dan, director. *Onward*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2020.

remember Kevin saying he couldn't handle losing another father. His stepdad needed a quadruple bypass but pulled through. We decided to buy the house.

Ernest Volk, Kevin's father, died a month shy of his 47th birthday after suffering his third heart attack. His widow, Jeanine, kept his photos around the house so her three children would know his face. After she remarried and her new husband moved in, Ernest's things remained, but over time they moved further out of sight.

The day we arrived at the house with the moving truck, I was definitely taken aback. I had no idea how much would still be left in the house. We dealt with some and vowed to deal with the rest at a later date. The basement became our main repository, like the final scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg) where all the items no one knows what to do with have to carefully be stored. Almost every room in the house had at least one desk or cabinet that held family artifacts. I can't explain the reasoning behind why we have held onto so many seemingly useless things from a pool pass to a musty suitcase, but every year we hold on to something it makes it a little more difficult to throw it out. Had we not purchased the house, the majority of the items would have ended up in the trash.

Our House is about how place and mementos help us hold on to those we have lost and maintain connection to the past. Our house is filled with many memories, some of joy and love but also those of profound loss. It has passed hands through several generations and this is where the family has left behind the things they can't physically and mentally carry with them. How we handle our memories is very personal. I realize for some it is easier to throw away relics of the past and allow themselves to forget, while others need to envelop themselves in reminders and relive those moments. (Abrams 133-136). What to do with all

Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark. Dir. Steven Spielberg, Paramount Pictures, 1981.

Abrams, Rebecca. *When Parents Die: Learning to Live with the Loss of a Parent*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2013.

these discarded memories has been something Kevin and I have been trying to balance since we moved into the house.

At the beginning of the film, we see Kevin digging in the backyard. He is making changes in the yard to make room for what will become a roofed pavilion. Throughout the film we revisit the progress on the build. It is Kevin's addition to the house, his legacy. At the end of the film, we see he has completed its roof. The build of the pavilion coincides with our searching through family archives, digging both externally and internally through the house.

Through my voiceover we learn about some background on the house and how I came to believe it was haunted. Shortly after the birth of our oldest daughter, Sofia, I would find lights in the house mysteriously turned on. It was a back and forth every day, turning things off in one room and then finding lights on again in a different room. At first, I figured I had just absentmindedly turned a light on without thinking. I began to double and triple check myself when I would leave a room, but that didn't stop the occurrences. Instead, they became more frequent. I would have to acknowledge the lights sometimes for it to stop. The occurrences led to a direct connection forming between the house and myself. From that point, I was not just passively moving things around in the house, I was actively interested in learning more about the entity I thought was watching over me and my family.

The inclusion of this part of the story is important because Ernest has been a figure that looms over our lives and home both literally and figuratively. We have more of his things than anyone else in the family and it has become impossible for me to think of throwing any of it out. When we first felt his presence, we knew very little about his life. The things we found were puzzle pieces that we often needed to ask questions to understand. Even as the feeling he is sitting next to us has diminished, we will never fully exorcise him from the house as long as we continue to uncover his hidden treasures.

The main room where the lights were switched on by our phantom is the dining room.

This is another space we revisit several times throughout the film. Except for a re-enactment of the light being turned on and off, the light in this room is always off unless we are all gathered together. One of the film's final images is the light turning on and the family acknowledging the camera and the recording of the conversation.

We have been fortunate enough to uncover spools of old films and recover VHS tapes of prior film conversions that go back to the 1950s. In some instances, they are the only surviving images of family members who have passed. They were in the very nook and crannies of the house, almost as if they have been waiting to finally be uncovered. *Our House* mixes these archival films, video and photos along with present day action and interviews. It shows the process of taking our memories out of storage and looking at them again with fresh eyes. Footage of us digitizing and viewing our home videos from when my daughters were little show us reliving the past even as we are painting and making changes in the house in the present.

You see me going through the archives, editing video, patching together Ernest's story on my computer. Interviews with Kevin are interwoven to provide information on his family and the history of the house. We also hear interviews with other members of the Volk family who have lived in the house, including Kevin's brother, mother and two aunts. I have chosen not to show anyone other than the four current residents of the house in interviews. It is "our house" and the other voices are people who once lived here but now do not. They are as disembodied as our ghost, telling us about the past but they are not part of the house's present.

Ernest narrated some of his own young story. Ernest put together a project we believe was for his bar mitzvah when he was likely twelve or thirteen. He titled it *Me* and it includes a number of short biographical chapters. He had put together photographs of his youth and wrote out stories of his first camping experience and what he imagined his father was

thinking the day he was born. *Our House* uses excerpts from *Me* so we can get a sense of young Ernie's manner of speaking. In its current form, I am reading his excerpts.

I was inspired by the formal and conceptual devices of two documentaries, *Dear Zachary* (Kuenne) and *Rewind* (Neulinger) and how they interweaved archival footage into the story. *For Zachary* begins its story as if it is a compilation of anecdotes for a young child to one day know his deceased father. Interviews are woven with old photos and home movies reminiscing about Zachary's father. Later, the story turns dark as family and friends recount the various tragedies that have befallen young Zachary and his family. *Rewind* uses its archival footage almost like a challenge for the viewer to look deeper into a family's private life. (Ehrlich) Neulinger's film is about what we don't capture in our home movies as much as what we do capture.

The only surviving films from Kevin's grandparents, Hyman and Lily Volk, show us what the house was like in the 1950s and the large family gatherings that they hosted. Ernest's return from serving in Korea is documented. Kevin's aunt recounts the day and how the experience in the Marines inspired Ernest to pursue medicine. Kevin and I tell you about Ernest's struggles to become a doctor and how he eventually had to give up that dream. There is a large collection of photos of Ernest as a young man, especially of his time in the military, but the number of photos drastically drops as he grows older and struggles financially. Instead of photos and films, we have collections of stamps, foreign currency and hobbies.

Our House focuses on the process of reviewing the old papers and photos rather than solely looking at them. I acknowledge that we are gathering and editing. We are creating

Dear Zachary. Dir. Kurt Kuenne, Kurt, Oscilloscope, 2008

Rewind. Dir. Sasha Neulinger, Grizzly Creek Films, 2019.

Ehrlich, David. "Rewind' Review: Sasha Joseph Neulinger's Staggering Doc Unearths Sexual Assault in Home Videos." *IndieWire*, 1 May 2019.

memories even as we are looking at the memories of the past. It's a constant cycle. We see Ernest in silent films through the years, including moments when he is with baby and toddler aged Kevin. I was drawn to how similar these older films were to the home movies I had shot of my husband and our children. Both men watch their children's first steps in the living room, and they make sure the children are safe on the carousel. Kevin and Ernest both are seen on the roof working. People have always said Kevin's brother is the one that looks like his father but through these films we can see that there is more to looking like someone than the shape of your face. Legacy can take many forms.

Like *Rewind, Dick Johnson is Dead* (Johnson) and *Stories We Tell* (Polley) are documentary films that play into the notion that the camera is not just an observer. The camera is an active participant by the nature of it being present whatever the purpose. In recording our family stories, we are at once capturing and purging ourselves, creating a space outside of us where memories can live (Bramesco) (Anderst). For me, it is like showing the process of curating a collection; in this case, it is putting a collection of memories in one place.

My sister's first house was purchased from an estate filled with the entire contents of the prior owners, an elderly couple who died within months of each other. I remember going to help her clean it up and being shocked that all their personal belongings including photos, love letters, clothes remained. They had living family - children and grandchildren. Yet not a soul came to look if there was even an old photo they wanted. It was a horrible feeling,

Dick Johnson is Dead. Dir. Kirsten Johnson, Netflix, 2020.

Stories We Tell. Dir. Sarah Polley, Roadside Attractions, 2012.

Anderst, Leah. "Memory's Chorus: Stories We Tell and Sarah Polley's Theory of Autobiography." *Sense of Cinema*, December 2013

Bramesco, Charles. "I want to break cinema': is Dick Johnson Is Dead the most radical film of 2020?" *The Guardian*, 29 Sept 2020

throwing out someone's life, but it also made me think about why I keep things and why I'm drawn to taking photographs and filming. It's nice to think someone will want it. But at the end of the day, I do it for myself, so I can remember. This perspective is part of my voiceover in the film.

Thinking again of the cycles of family, the film ends where it begins, with our family in the present reviewing the past and thinking about whether the house will stay in the family in the next generation and beyond. I ask if my things will be kept or thrown out, valued or unwanted, trash or treasure. The light Ernest first turned on for me all those years ago, turns on as we sit at the dining room table.

Research Analysis

After the death of my father in 2018, all I wanted to do was talk about him. I wanted to re-watch old videos of him. I wanted to hear his voice. My mother and I would reminisce and tell funny stories and laugh. But when I wanted to share those memories with my daughters, they told me it was too painful to participate. It was easier to put those memories away somewhere with the hope that time would scab the wound. The same happened with my siblings. My mother found I was the only one she could talk about him with because my brothers and sister would change the subject.

We were all dealing with our pain and grief differently and I had the luxury of being able to access my own memories and mementos. My husband, Kevin, had not had the same luxury when he lost his father. He was three years old when Ernest died and had only one small memory to think back on. Throughout his young life, Kevin found most people reacted

much like my siblings did; whenever Ernest would come up in conversation, they would change the subject or speak in platitudes: “He would give you the shirt off his back.” “He took care of his family.”

Many studies have been done in the field of psychology on the best way to deal with grief (Wadeley 8) but there is no certainty that one way is better than another. However, some studies show that avoidance can lead to a state of prolonged grief which may become more difficult to effectively treat as time wears on. (Maccallum et al.105-109). Having someone to share grief with can help give you more confidence to face your feelings (van der Houwen et al. 1675-1676). For many children who lose a parent young, there is a compounded grief, grief over the death and grief over the relationship (Abrams 135). When we sat down to watch *Onward*, that grief over the loss of the father-son relationship was triggered.

Onward director, Dan Scanlon, states, “For me, having lost my father when I was so young, never having known him, all you have is pieces of them.” For him, the film was partially a healing process that used the idea that family “is a combination of truth and fear and emotions and also ridiculously awkward, funny moments” (Idelson). I wanted to take this idea of ‘pieces’ of the past, which for me is the family archives, and put out the idea that we are part of the archive. The archive is meaningful because it is part of us, and we are part of it.

Photos and photo albums can tell us about family bonds. The moments captured and

Wadeley, Alison. “The Mourning After: Cultural Differences in Coping with Bereavement.” *Psychology Review*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2000

Maccallum, Fiona, et al. “The push and pull of grief: Approach and avoidance in bereavement.” *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, vol. 48, 2015

van der Houwen, Karolijne, et al. “Mediating processes in bereavement: The role of rumination, threatening grief interpretations, and deliberate grief avoidance.” *Social Science & Medicine* 2010.

Idelson, Karen. “Animated Characters of 2020 Faced Up to Their Fears.” *Variety*, 2 March 2021.

stored can be done with affection as well as grief over the ending of a moment (Sandbye 5). We can choose to look at images of the past through an anthropological lens and focus on the social cues displayed to understand the relationships involved. These glimpses of the past are also communications to the present. Old photos not only construct memories, but they indicate what the people in the photo felt about the moment (Sandbye 12). The pictures of our lives show us what we value either consciously or unconsciously. They can be learning tools to show us about culture and society at large (Spielman 766).

With each generation, the types of photo and motion picture archive has changed. The earliest photos we have in the house are black and white. They are on thick photo stock paper and glossy. They are all carefully posed. Similarly, the films taken by Hyman Volk are generally posed shots with people told to wave to the camera. There is little film wasted on scenery and set up. It is a few seconds of this and then a few seconds of that, then on to the next thing. The 8mm films taken by Kevin's parents, especially those shot by his mother, have longer takes. She often takes the time to create a poster board to introduce different shots, such as "Glenda's 4th Birthday" or "Our Night-time Ritual." Instead of large family gatherings, we start to see intimate moments. There are more close ups, and the camera lingers longer.

Then we come to the video age and my own home movies that at first are shot on VHSC, then on MiniDV, and now are shot on HD video. Today, we can record almost indefinitely but that doesn't mean that we keep everything we take. We are limited by hard drive space. Some things get to stay, and some things have to go. Sometimes the sheer amount of video is a hindrance. Is there ever enough time to watch everything? How do we

Sandbye, Mette. "Looking at the Family Photo Album: A Resumed Theoretical Discussion of Why and how." *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, vol. 6, 2014.

Spielman, Jane. "The family photography project: "We will just read what the pictures tell us."" *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 54, no. 8, 2001.

decide what images to display in our home? We are still creating a way to represent ourselves through the images (Petrelli et al. 321). Just because our collection of photos and films is larger does not mean they are more organized. Printed photos are usually kept loose in boxes or envelopes, just as our digital ones are kept in a jumble in a file folder on a computer.

When we choose an image to be a memento, it becomes highly significant (Petrelli et al. 330). Not every picture has the same value as another. Some we would save in a fire before others, or we give it a special space within our homes. Photo mementos “often represent connections among generations and are persistent over decades and sometimes over lifetimes. Photos do not become mementos by chance, but they are deliberately chosen as distinct symbols of personal values or special affections” (Petrelli et al. 331).

There are a number of films that incorporate family archives such as photos, films and videos, including the previously mentioned *For Zachary*, *Dick Johnson is Dead*, *Stories We Tell* and *Rewind*. These films all deal with families in transition, grappling with loss of some kind, whether it’s loss of a loved one, loss of innocence or loss of trust. They are all personal documentaries that allow us to peak into these lives with the double distance of archives. If the camera gives us separation, then shooting the archival footage is like seeing through a second camera. It’s an acknowledgement of a creative device to invite the audience into our intimate space. The filmmaker is also the narrator, letting the audience into their thoughts and process of why this film is getting made. Other recent films in this genre include Oscar winning *My Octopus Teacher* (Ehrlich and Reed) and *Circus of Books* (Mason).

Dr. Sandra E. Cohen writes in reference to *My Octopus Teacher*, “Going back to the

Petrelli, Daniela, et al. “Photo mementos: Designing digital media to represent ourselves at home.” *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2014.

My Octopus Teacher. Dir. Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed, Netflix, 2020.

Circus of Books. Dir. Rachel Mason, Rachel, Netflix, 2019.

same place over and over heals you.” The journey of revisiting a place is about “Learning to trust yourself; and not be afraid of what you need to see” (Cohen) . The filmmaker goes back to see his octopus friend every day and learns about himself and life through her actions. His narration provides us context to the octopus’ activities and scientific information. He then lets us into his own mindset, telling us about how he feels about what he is seeing.

I also found a short film that focuses on an entomological collection and its curators very inspiring. *The Love Bugs* (Clinton and Otto) tells the story of Charlie and Lois O’Brien, two leading experts in their field who must say goodbye to their collection of 1.25 million specimens. They are growing older and want to make sure that their life’s work will go somewhere it will continue to be used and appreciated. The film is not about insect collections, it’s about not being the master of your own legacy and believing in the value of your life’s work. I was drawn to how the O’Briens were still so passionate about their collection and how that excitement is passed on to the young researchers who are taking their collection. It’s not about the archive; its what people feel about it that matters.

Production Process

Over the years, we had gathered information from the oldest members of Kevin’s family, his two aunts. However, distance and circumstance has not always made in depth

Cohen, Sandra E. “‘My Octopus Teacher’ Why Healing Means Returning to the Same Place Over & Over.” *Characters on the Couch*, 18 Nov. 2020.

The Love Bugs. Dir. Maria Clinton and Amanda Otto, POV Shorts, 2019.

conversation on the subject easy with them. But since part of my goal was researching life in the house when it was first purchased by Kevin's grandparents, we reached out to Maxine Stein and Gayle Cohen for their recollections on the house. Luckily, both women seem to have excellent memory. Maxine, 85, remembers names and dates and old addresses. She told us the reason the family moved from Brooklyn was because they knew one of the carpenters doing construction and he recommended the neighborhood. Due to distance, the interviews were all recorded remotely using a Mac and QuickTime.

Gayle, 74, was able to give her memories of being a child here, playing in the yard when none of the houses had fences. She also remembers back to when her older brother was in the Korean War and the effect that it had on her parents. Her recollection of the day he came home from service fits exactly to the 16mm film of the event. Both these women knew different aspects of their brother's personality and I could hear how one saw him as a rival and the other as an idol. They also provided stories on their parents' relationship and the cause of death of Hyman Volk at the age of 60.

I also spoke with Carl Stein, Maxine's son, who lived in the house for a short time as a child and is the only one of Kevin's cousins with memories of Ernest and their grandfather. He also had the strongest relationship with their grandmother. He has been researching the family line in Poland and was able to provide information about relationships outside of the house.

We began to have a clearer timeline of when items first came to the house and to whom they belonged. We learned that Lily Volk was a musician, having learned to play piano at a young age, and she taught all three of her children to play. Hyman and Lily spoke Yiddish to each other so the children would not understand their conversations. They were old fashioned in their ideas that women would get married and run a house while a man should continue education in order to strive to provide for his family. Ernest was pushed to be

ambitious while Maxine was told that college would not teach her how to change diapers any differently.

Andrea and Alan Baum have lived on our street for over fifty years and were able to talk to me about the critical time right before and after Ernest's death. The interview was conducted outdoors due to COVID-19. They described how Ernest increasingly looked tired and seemed perpetually out of breath. He was too proud to accept help doing things around the house and suffered his first heart attack after cutting back branches on a tree in the yard. Andrea watched Kevin and his siblings so their mother could be in the hospital after each of Ernest's heart attacks. She told me how everyone on the block made a concerted effort to keep things "normal" for the Volk kids after his death.

I interviewed Kevin's immediate family including brother Donald, sister Glenda, mother Jeanine and stepfather Shelly. I was able to interview Glenda in the house and she shared the importance of having photos of her father when she was a child. She has never forgotten his face although she has forgotten the sound of his voice. His parents sent us additional home movies on VHS that I was able to digitize. These include the only images of Kevin together with his father.

A large part of early production on the film was the gathering and digitizing of media, including various forms of video from VHS to MiniDV, and organizing this material. This was done simultaneously with the collecting of photos and other archives around the house. I began to film the process of digitizing and watching the videos. I chose not to do correct correction to the archival films and video, except to occasionally brighten the image. The intent being to show them just as they are and how anyone would generally have to see them.

My original thought for *Our House* was to create a timeline of the family based on the objects that were left behind in the house. But the objects that were left behind for the most part did not carry enough emotional weight. There was not a story involved that made enough

of them special to us. Everyone other than Hyman and Ernest Volk had had the opportunity to take what they valued out of the house. While something could be said about what we discard, Ernest's things did not fall into this category.

I conducted a group interview with Kevin, and our daughters Sofia and Ruby and solo interviews with all three of them. I interviewed Kevin a number of times for short stretches. His work schedule in the Spring and Summer of 2020 was chaotic and it was a challenge to find times and quiet locations to record. Instead of planned sit-down interviews, I began to film the family during their activities and ask them questions while they were occupied. Kevin began his pavilion construction and filming the build would be a spine of the film. Ruby painting her room added to the theme of ongoing progression in the house even while staying the same.

The biggest challenges in production occurred in August 2020. During a storm, we had damage to our kitchen sunroom. We lost power for several days and when it returned a number of electrical problems remained. But none of those compares to the challenge of losing my mother a week later. My mother had come to stay with us just a week before the storm. She had been ill for several years and her death was not completely unexpected. I felt she came because she knew her time was limited. My mother always loved being in our house because she felt it had a positive atmosphere. She was sitting in our dining room when she passed away. It had been her favorite room. Even after dealing with the funeral, it was difficult to get back to working on *Our House* and on a project about healing and legacy while my own bereavement was still so fresh.

It took me time to reconnect with the film and its themes. I had several script drafts, but they all were rather impersonal. When I would cut them together, I often felt it was just facts but no feeling. With some distance, I find that losing my mother has given me additional perspective on the house and its artifacts. I think of my brother who purchased my

parents' home a few years ago as some sort of giant keepsake. He does not live there and is constantly torn over the idea of what to do with it. It just keeps it just as my parents did. It's the opposite of our house, which we feel free to continue to change and evolve. It's a reminder to me that, in the end, all the things we collect are only valuable until they are not.

I had planned for Kevin to do a narration for the film, but as I used my own temporary voice-over track while editing, I found the film was growing from my point of view. Kevin's voice is still prominent, with audio pulled from the interviews conducted. Recording audio outside was difficult. On a nice day, we were not the only people outside. One particular day we had several airplanes, a news helicopter, a mower, car radios, barking dogs and a bird who perched nearby and continued to chirp incessantly. Instead, his indoor interviews are layered underneath the outdoor footage.

Instead of digitizing all the photos for use in the film, I began to film me placing them against a black background to make it clear that we are curating this collection of family artifacts. Strangely, the less I looked for things, the more I found. My file cabinet drawer would not close and after somehow getting my arm all the way in the back I pulled out a large envelope filled with family death certificates and Kevin's stepdad's military records. From then on, almost every week I found something new.

Crafting the voiceover has been a process of trial and error. Initially, most of it came from excerpts of my voice from when I was filming other things and, to me, it sounded much more natural than the 'at the mic' narration I recorded. I began to write things out and record more. I had one draft of the film that was very voiceover heavy. I exported the film to Vimeo and watched it elsewhere. This process helped tremendously because now I focused on the film as a whole instead of constantly stopping where I was to make an adjustment on the editing timeline. After a day of editing, doing an export became part of my routine, like adding a period to a sentence. When I was not happy with a voiceover I would remove it

entirely, export, and watch it again. Often, I would find the voiceover was superfluous and I would leave it out entirely.

Hearing Kirsten Johnson's voiceover in *Dick Johnson is Dead* was helpful in crafting my own. I liked how she got right to the story points in the beginning. She told you what she was doing and why. I had been trying to give too much information and was bogged down in details. Once I let go of the idea that the audience needed to know every detail and every bit of history, it became easier to edit things out.

As I was editing one day, I heard my daughter playing piano upstairs and it went along quite well with what I was working on. It was an improvisation she was working on but when I asked if she would mind me recording her to use her playing in the film, she respectfully declined. I had hoped to get one or both of the girls to play some original music but when it came time to record, they did not feel their music was ready to be used. In talking with all the family, I was surprised to learn how many members of the family had grown up playing piano, so it became a natural choice to select piano music for the film. I was able to find an artist with a number of songs available royalty free.

We only know just part of Ernest's story and there is pressure to do him justice. I talk to the house and ask for any spirit that may still be lingering to give me direction. The next day I find his grammar school autograph book in which he writes, "to read in my old age." The film evolved from being about how the house connected us to family to about the man seen in these photos and what that means to us.

I asked my mother-in-law why she had kept so many of his things and other items left behind from his parents and sisters, even after remarrying. She said it was her way of honoring her late husband. She wanted to give his children the opportunity to decide what they wanted. Over the years, whenever we came across things, we told Kevin's siblings about them. They say, "Oh wow, that's great," but are content to let us hold on to everything. I have

offered them things and asked if there was something they wanted, but neither wants the burden of finding a place in their homes for it. It gives them comfort knowing it's here and that is enough. Oddly, I am rather relieved not to have to share Ernest's things. Even without a genetic link, he is still my family and I've developed a personal connection to him and to the things that I've found.

Audience & Exhibition

Our House is in the vein of a number of recently released documentaries that deal with family such as *Dick Johnson is Dead* and *Circus of Books*. One thing that never changes is that people have to deal with family and there will always be interest in how we handle our relationship with the past. People understand families are complicated and these documentaries may mirror their experience or provide a voyeuristic view into another family's life. We can see a thematic counterpart with going back to the 1973 reality series, *An American Family* (Gilbert).

The film could potentially do well as part of a compilation surrounding the theme of family. *The Love Bugs* was part of the PBS POV Shorts compilation *Legacy*. *Nobody's Business* (Berliner) is a film in which the filmmaker interviews members of his family both near and far searching for connection. This film also aired as part of the PBS POV series in 1997. American Documentary is a recurring supporter of family archive-based films

An American Family. Created by Craig Gilbert, PBS, 1973.

Nobody's Business. Dir. Alan Berliner, Look Now!, 1997.

including the feature film *51 Birch Street* (Block) and the short *Into My Life* (Hucikova, et al.).

I think it will largely appeal to middle class people over 35 who may be dealing with similar archives and as such any festival submissions would have to be targeted to ones that cater to that audience. Library or gallery showings may also be an avenue to pursue.

The music used in the film is all creative commons and the musicians will be credited for its use. As most of my interview subjects were interviewed remotely, their consent to be recorded was done verbally at the beginning of the interview. I will obtain written releases where possible to add to the verbal. Most of the people seen in photos and films with the exception of Kevin's siblings and aunts have passed away. It would be great if someone reached out if they saw themselves in the film. We still have a landline and it's the same number that Hyman and Lily had back when it was their house. It would not be the first time we had someone reach out for information.

I also plan to create a companion website that would carry edited excerpts of all the interviews with the family as well as historical information on the area through the years. This will include the 16mm films from Hyman Volk. The webpage would focus on the house prior to 1980 and would be continually updated with material as it becomes available.

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Into My Life. Dir. Ivana Hucikova, Sarah Keeling, and Grace Remington, UnionDocs, 2018.

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