



PHOTOS BY WILLIAM THOMAS CAIN / FOR THE COURIER INTES

Director Kevin Hackenberg (left) and producer/writer Ross Schriftman watch during filming of the short film "My Million Dollar Mom" at Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park.

One in a 'Million'

Maple Glen man brings late mother's "remarkable" life to the screen.

By ANDY VINEBERG
STAFF WRITER

Ross Schriftman's quiet suburban home in Maple Glen suddenly resembled the set of a Hollywood movie. Actors and crew members took over the house during that sunny August Friday, all there to tell his story, to bring to life his deeply personal, heartbreaking yet inspiring words of the enduring love between a son and his mother.

Eight years earlier, Schriftman had sat in a TV room in that same house, sharing a tender moment with his dying mother. He had come home from morning Rosh Hashana services and put on a CD of Jewish music for her to listen to. He held her hand and began to cry.

Her ability to communicate had

drastically diminished by that point, the effect of a two-year struggle with Alzheimer's, but as she sat in her wheelchair on that September afternoon, hand-in-hand with her son, she looked at him and said, comfortingly, "You're crying."

At the same time, she reached out for the hand of her caregiver, Nora, and said, "God bless you."

Shirley Schriftman died three weeks later, on Oct. 10, 2009, at 84. The last thing Ross heard her say was "I'm not answering any more questions," a couple of days before her death, after he repeatedly asked her if she wanted more Jell-O or water.

But while she would share no more of herself physically, her story — and the impact she had on others — would live on.

Ross Schriftman has made sure of that. In 2010, Schriftman, 64, completed his first book, "My Million Dollar Mom," subtitled "The Story of the Remarkable Life of an Ordinary Person." The book

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PHOTO COURTESY OF ROSS SCHRIFTMAN

Schriftman poses with his mother, Shirley, in 2004 in a photo that was used in his campaign for Pennsylvania state representative. His mother began showing signs of dementia a year later.

Recalling a dark day for America, and her family, 16 years later

This was the year I wasn't going to write about 9/11.

I've had all these years to reflect on it, after all. Life goes on. The sun still rises and sets.

But then I thought back to that day that changed everything. I realized that sometimes, in dreams, I still hear the words "Michael! Michael! Where are you?"

And so back I go, just to reflect on where we've been as a country,

what it has meant, and how it has impacted on so many of us despite the 16 years that have elapsed.

Just as with the JFK assassination, we all know exactly where we were on that gorgeous September morning when nature seemed to be gifting us with a perfect day — all blue skies and sunshine.

It was the kind of day that sent out vibes that "all's right with the world."

And perhaps that very irony made the whole surreal day feel even more grotesque.

In our household, it could not have been a more routine scene.

My newly retired husband was reading the papers, I was in the kitchen thinking about what to defrost for dinner that night, and the TV was on almost like white noise.

I'm not at all sure what made me stop in my tracks at the tone of the "breaking news" that punctuated our lives that beautiful

September day.

Perhaps the switch from usual sounds of those years, back then — of routine car accidents, fires, little bursts of violence — somehow reached my subconscious because there was something off, some tone of urgency that made me turn up the sound.

The visuals made no sense. A plane seemed to be doing weird things. The TV announcer sounded shook. And for a brief moment, would it be salmon or chicken for dinner seemed — well,

absurdly unimportant.

The enormity of what was happening first eluded me in a jumble of crazy words like "hitting the World Trade Center," and some primal instinct that something was very definitely amiss made me look for my husband.

Because Vic is not a typical TV watcher, he was tucked away in our silent den on his recliner, smiling at something in the paper. It would be his last smile for a while...

Within less than a minute, our
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Sally Friedman





WILLIAM THOMAS CAIN / FOR THE COURIER TIMES
Cast and crew work on a scene for "My Million Dollar Mom" on Aug. 27 at Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, one of several area locations used during filming.

Mom

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was published in 2011 and Schrifman has since written short and feature-length screenplays inspired by the book's true story.

Which brings us to 2017, and the short film "My Million Dollar Mom," which was shot over four days, Aug. 25-28, at various locations in Montgomery and Bucks counties. The film, directed by Kevin Hackenberg and starring Pete Postiglione and Susan Moses as Ross and Shirley, is intended as not just a poignant narrative drama, but as a teaching tool for community groups to use in discussions of late-in-life issues, Schrifman said.

Ideally, work will begin on bringing the feature-length version to the screen some time after the short, which is expected to run about 20 minutes, is completed.

"It works not only as a feature, but as a short, concisely told story," Hackenberg said. "With Ross's history with his mom, it's a really compelling story that will affect all of us at some point in our lives — taking care of parents when get they get older and their health starts declining. It's definitely a universal theme that intersects with all of us."

For first-time producer/screenwriter Schrifman, a semi-retired insurance agent in Horsham who helped seniors with Medicare and other health-related issues, working on a film about his mother's life was a cathartic and creatively rewarding experience.

"The interesting thing about being the producer and screenwriter is I'm right there at the monitor, and Kevin might turn to me and say, 'This line's not working,'" he said. "He'll have his way he wants to do it, I'll have my way, and then we'll converse for two or three



MY MILLION DOLLAR MOM LLC
Ross Schrifman and his mother, Shirley, are played in the film by Pete Postiglione and Susan Moses.

minutes and come back with a third way that's even better."

Hackenberg, who has worked on the crews of such films as "The Sixth Sense" and "Chasing Amy," said of Schrifman: "For a first-time producer, Ross did amazing. It's been one of the best experiences I've ever had working with somebody. He's smart and quickly learned the tricks of the trade."

Schrifman, an Upper Dublin High School graduate who lives in the same Maple Glen house where he grew up, originally got the idea to write a book about his mother as he sat in the converted bedroom she used as a TV room, where she kept her vast library of favorite films and personal mementos.

Shirley was a huge film buff who wrote to and received responses from the likes of Orson Welles and Burgess Meredith. (Ross's middle name is Farley, after actor Farley Granger.) She regularly attended movies at the Ambler Theater

(making sure to stay through the credits) and was a big fan of dramas, musicals and even animated fare such as "Happy Feet."

"I sat at her desk and started making notes about her life, all the different things she did," said Schrifman, whose parents divorced in 1973 (his father, Herbert, died in 1995). "I watched some of her favorite movies and just wrote, and the words just poured out onto the paper."

"Internally, it helped me communicate who she was and my time with her. We were very close as a mom and son, partners in politics and community events, things like the BuxMont chapter of Parents Without Partners. Externally, it was something for the community and the people who knew her, and an example of how we should care for one another."

Schrifman, the second of four brothers (his older brother Roy died of cancer six months after Shirley's death), was politically active throughout his life, running



MY MILLION DOLLAR MOM LLC
Schrifman (front left in blue shirt) hangs out with cast and crew members in his Maple Glen driveway.

for Pennsylvania state representative three times. His passion was supported by his mother.

In the film, "Ross gets a once-in-a-lifetime chance to run for Congress at the same time his mother is going downhill," he said. "The irony is she always wanted me to have a political career."

The dilemma facing the character parallels Schrifman's real-life experiences, in which he eventually put his political aspirations on hold to focus on his mother's needs.

"I wanted to include the concept that life goals often bump up against the needs of loved ones," he said.

Schrifman said he got the idea to turn the book into a movie while driving and hearing a song on the radio that evoked a memory of his mother.

"I remember thinking, 'Boy, this would be a great scene for a movie,' and it just developed from that," he said. "I realized you can't write a script just based on music, but it kind of inspired me. I started to be reminded of different things, trips to the shore, events that took place in our lives before and

after she had Alzheimer's."

He Googled screenwriting software, consulted family members with filmmaking experience, took a couple of webinars, hired a film consultant ... and eventually felt ready to bring a story inspired by his mother's life to the screen.

The filming locations included his house in Maple Glen, his office in Horsham, Kohler Park in Horsham, Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, the Central Bucks Senior Activity Center in Doylestown and a posh hotel in Philadelphia. For the latter scene, actor Currie Graham, a regular on shows such as "Agent Carter" and "Murder in the First," flew in from California to play the governor of Pennsylvania. Christopher Mann, who played recurring characters on "House of Cards" and "The Wire," plays Marvin Stern, a political mentor to Ross in the film.

"It was really interesting to have all these people show up at my house, introduce themselves and get right to work," Schrifman said. "These people are real professionals — they get in there and do their jobs."

Schrifman believes that, even in just 20 minutes, the film will give audiences a good idea of who his mother was, and also lead to discussions of situations they'll have to deal with in their own lives. According to the film's website, the story includes "politics, marathon running, dancing, Jewish holidays, dogs, cats, excitement, disappointments and triumphs."

He cites a quote attributed to Mother Teresa when describing his mother — "We can do no great things; only small things with great love" — and talks about the ways she was always looking out for others, including working with immigrants to help them gain citizenship.

"She didn't put on airs — this is just who she was and how she did things," Schrifman said. "I wanted to show her as example of how we care for one another, and also show that people with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia still have a valuable point of view and can still be helpful to other people."

For more information, visit mymilliondollarmom.com.

Andy Vineberg: 215-949-4135; email: avineberg@calkins.com; Twitter: @ADVineberg

Friedman

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equanimity was shattered as we stood mute and dazed in front of the kitchen TV.

At almost the same instant, we realized that three people in our family were in New York City that morning, and one's office was just yards away from the WTC.

Like so many of you, we simply couldn't grasp what was happening, but we knew with instinctive dread that after this day, nothing

would ever be the same. Not after being attacked on this presumably safe and sacred soil. A whole way of life was swept away. And as dramatic as that sounds, it was the new reality.

But the immediate panic: find our loved ones.

Selfish? Perhaps. But totally human.

Part of the anxiety was blessedly relieved when we managed to make contact with our daughter Amy and her husband David. Married just two months, they were beginning their lives together in the city they loved, full of hopes and dreams. And on that

morning, these newlyweds felt that those dreams were gone.

We cried together and then all of us faced the reality that Michael, our financial district area son-in-law, whose office was just across the street from the World Trade Center, had not yet been heard from.

I don't think I can yet put into words the several hours that followed. Our daughter — Michael's wife — was in shock. She had picked up their toddler son from nursery school and simply could not function. No word from Michael. None.

The phone became an

enemy — relentlessly silent except when panicky relatives and friends called in. My mother, already in her 90s, needed the kind of reassurance none of us could provide. Our daughters tried. So did I.

"I wish I hadn't lived to see this!" she said between sobs. "Will we ever see Michael again? Is this what life will be from now on?"

My heart was breaking for her, watching the world go mad in her high-rise apartment in Philadelphia. With hundreds of other equally terrified people, but alone...

And then it happened.

The phone rang. And it was the one person in the world whose voice we so yearned to hear on the other end.

Michael had gotten on the last ferry out of lower Manhattan that day. So many others were not that lucky, and believe me, our hearts go out to those families who lost so much on that terrible day.

Even Michael had seen and heard too much even to describe, but he was safe. Whole. Shaken to his core, but on his way back to his Montclair home and family.

And all these years later, I know that his entire perspective on life changed

that day.

So yes, 9/11 was powerful, personal and painful in what it did to this country.

So tomorrow, on 9/11, like all of you, I will remember that day. Our collective horror and sorrow. Our personal pain and panic.

And I will remind myself that nothing has ever been the same — and probably never will be.

But we can all pray in our own ways that 9/11 is history. Terrifying, terrible history.

And that it will remain just that.

Sally Friedman is a freelance writer. Contact her at pinegander@aol.com