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Upcoming autism film screening gives WKU students the spotlight

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Feb 9, 2018

Western Kentucky University students with autism will step into the spotlight and share their inclusion experiences during a panel discussion later this month.

The panel will take place at 3:30 p.m. Feb. 20 in the Carol Wedge Studio Theater at the Southern Kentucky Performing Arts Center. It's connected to the screening of the independent film "Deej," which tells the story of DJ Savarese as a first-year college student with autism who insists on speaking up for his peers.

Savarese, who speaks through a text-to-voice synthesizer, has a gift for words and poetry. He was adopted from foster care after being abandoned by his parents at birth.

The screening will take place at 7 p.m. at the Capitol Arts Center after the panel discussion. Both the screening and panel are free and open to the public, with the caveat that seating at the panel is available on a first-come, first-serve basis. The film screening is the latest in the Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers.

Lynn O'Keefe, the owner of Gallery 916, is among local sponsors who have made Bowling Green's participation in the Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers possible.

“With each film, we have really reached out to the community that has this subject matter as a special interest,” she said, adding that the film was selected in part to include the Kelly Autism Program at WKU.

Other sponsors include the Bowling Green Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Warren County Public Library, WKU’s Cultural Enhancement Series, 440 Main, White Squirrel Brewery and Susan and Chuck Webb.

Mary Lloyd Moore, executive director of the Suzanne Vitale Clinical Education Complex at WKU, said the panel is meant to give students a chance “to talk about issues that they have” and show how ways they can be better supported.

“We’re all in it together,” Moore said, adding that the event aims to offer insights into inclusion.

The panel will feature students from the Kelly Autism Program’s Circle of Support, which offers students support with counseling, social events and other services.

Later that evening at the film’s screening, “Deej” director Robert Rooy will participate in a question-and-answer session at the Capitol Arts Theater.

As part of his visit, Moore added that Rooy will participate in a private luncheon at the complex and then take a tour.



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Founded in 2003, the Suzanne Vitale Clinical Education Complex is made up of the Family Resource Program, the Kelly Autism Program, the Renshaw Early Childhood Center and the Communication Disorders Clinic.

The complex assists hundreds of clients and families each year while also serving as a research center for faculty and an academic resource for students, according to its website.

In a statement released by SKyPAC, Rooy said Savarese quickly learned about the depth of his character and personal gifts.

“When I first met DJ (Savarese), I saw an attractive, earnest teenager who had been given a second chance at life through the love and encouragement of extraordinary parents,” he said. “But it didn’t take me long to understand that there was much more to this young man. His views on life were more sophisticated and perceptive than those of many adults, and his fresh, poetic ways of describing them outshone those of almost anyone else I’d met.

“I was also impressed by the fierce conviction that DJ brought to everything he undertook,” Rooy added. “He burned with an inner fire to ‘find freedom’ in his own life and to ‘break barriers’ for others like him. While he had come so far from a tormented past, what was striking was how far he wanted to go.”

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