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Roy Earnest on aging, surfing and PBC's annual surf film

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A resident of Pacifica since 1982, Roy Earnest started riding the waves as a kid, in his home state of New Jersey.

"I began as a body surfer and mat surfer," Earnest said, "then I started using a surfboard in 1969. I haven't stopped since."

Earnest is the president of Pacifica's Environmental Family. He is also the man behind the annual surf contest, Kahuna Kupuna. Kahuna Kupuna, which means "Big Chief Grandparent," is the only amateur surf contest in the world specifically designed for surfers over age 40. One of the co-founders of the Pedro Point Surf Club in Pacifica, since 1978 Earnest has worked as a gerontological social worker and senior services program manager. He is co-producer of the multi-award winning documentary "Surfing for Life," which screens this Friday night at the Mildred Owen Concert Hall. This is a benefit screening for the Pacifica Beach Coalition's Earth Day event in April. "Be sure to note that PBC's annual surf movie night fundraiser is a lot of fun," Earnest said, adding that the audience is a wonderful mix of surfers and non-surfers.

Written, directed and co-produced by David L. Brown, "Surfing for Life" is an, "inspirational documentary (68-minute version featuring ten surfers and 57-minute broadcast version featuring nine surfers) on older surfers as models of healthy and successful aging." PBC's benefit screening is the 68-minute version. The film premiered in 1999.

"I met David in January of 1993, through his wife Jane," Earnest said. "Jane and I worked in the San Francisco aging service network back then. I shared with Jane an essay I wrote in 1987, that was inspired by what I was learning about 'positive aging,' which has since grown into a societal movement."

Earnest's essay highlighted the sport of surfing. Long considered the "sole province of youth," Earnest's essay presented dedicated surfers of a certain age taking on those waves with life-affirming exuberance. Earnest thought it might bring a positive perspective to discussion groups with older participants who worried about their own "aging futures." Jane thought it might be better presented in a film where it could reach millions. She introduced Roy to her husband David. The next day, they began work on "Surfing for Life."

At film start, Earnest was already friends with one of the surfer's featured, Fred Van Dyke. Van Dyke's "Surfing for Life" film bio lists him as 70 years old, and a legendary pioneer of big wave surfing.

"I met Fred through an event that the Pedro Point Surf Club organized back in the late '80s," Earnest said. "And we became friends. I've kept in touch with him since the film premiered and I've also stayed in touch with another one of the film's surfers, Dr. Shay Bintliff, who is an amazing person in so many ways." Dr. Bintliff, who has since penned a celebrated book of poetry, is listed in her film bio as 64 years old, an emergency room physician, mother of two, and surfer for 35 years.

Through the film process, Earnest also became very close to another one of featured older surfers, Woody Brown. Born in 1912, Brown was considered, as former Hawaiian State Senator Fred Hemmings remarked, "one of the first and greatest icons in the history of surfing." Brown died in 2008 at the age of 96.

"I had long and interesting talks with Woody, whenever we got together," Earnest said. "He shared with me, what would become in his life, his every day personal 'practice' of loving, understanding, and appreciating every person and every 'thing' in his life. He lived 'aloha' and was very inspiring to be around."

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Earnest said he became interested in a career in gerontological social work, while attending college in New Jersey in 1975. One of his teachers convinced him that not only did the field offer a good job future, but that he could personally make a difference in the lives of older adults.

"She taught gerontology from a social justice perspective, which greatly appealed to me at the time and still does," Earnest said. "She convinced me that elders in our 'aging phobic' society too often don't get the respect and the support they deserve. While it is getting better, that's still too true today."

In 1980, Earnest moved to California and received his MSW at UC Berkeley. "I've never regretted my career choice and highly recommend it to anyone who feels comfortable talking to older adults and wants to enter an ever expanding field that's full of jobs! We need as many people as possible to join the effort to make our society a more 'aging friendly' place."

Earnest, who tries to make it his goal to surf Linda Mar, or one of the nearby beaches at least once a week, said one of the greatest things about the surfing community is it is intergenerational.

He has surfed with riders anywhere from age 10 to age 78, and one of his good surfing buddies just turned 66. Earnest remains completely behind the message of "Surfing for Life."

"A whole lot of people I meet are dreading their prospects for their own aging future," Earnest said. "While growing older isn't the easiest thing in the world to deal with, it has become quite clear from a lot of research that the aging process doesn't have to be an 'endless bummer!' I see 'Surfing for Life's' overall message as very much part of the effort to redefine what it means to grow older. There are so many more things we could be focusing our energy on than worrying about 'getting older'. It happens to the best of us, so let's just try to flow with what is, after all, a natural process just like a wave — the age wave."

If you go:


Event: "Surfing for Life," a film by David L. Brown and Roy Earnest, benefit screening for PBC's Earth Day

Where: Pacifica Performances Mildred Owen Concert Hall, 1220 Linda Mar Blvd.

When: Friday, Feb. 22. Two showings — 6 p.m. and 8:30 p.m.

Additional: Raffle prizes and no host wine and beer. Extremely fun social event for every age.

Tickets: \$15 in advance (recommended, prior years were sell outs). \$20 at door, \$10 for 16 and under and seniors (65+). Available at Sonlight Surf Shop, 575 Crespi Drive, Café Pacifica, 1821 Palmetto Ave., or online at www.pacificabeachcoalition.org (<http://www.pacificabeachcoalition.org>)

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