

Art on a Mission for MS

Local doctor uses entertaining documentary film, live show and medical thriller to promote understanding

When the lights go down at the Malco Theatre for the premiere screening of *Taking Back the Future: Voices of MS*, it will signal the culmination of an extraordinary project for Richard Pellegrino, M.D., Ph. D. But the showing of this film at the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival is only the beginning, and only a part of a much larger mission.

"This documentary has work to do, and we're going to put it to work," Dr. Pellegrino explained in a recent interview.

As the President of a Hot Springs clin-

ical research center, multiple sclerosis clinic and an inpatient physical rehabilitation program for people with MS, Dr. Pellegrino became acutely aware of the need to educate the public on the challenges of those diagnosed with chronic incurable diseases.

Several years ago he hit on the unusual idea of using various art forms as pathways to promote understanding. "Stories have been used for centuries as a vehicle for teaching. And if the story's good enough, we may even enjoy the teaching," he says.

To allow people a media voice addressing the disease and its conditions, Dr. Pellegrino opened a website, *YourMovieProject.com*, several years ago. Hundreds of MS patients from all fifty states and six countries responded, writing narratives about their experiences.

Whereas Pellegrino had previously been limited to his scientific knowledge of the disease, the website allowed him to "get inside the heads" of the people who actually lived with MS. "The letters provided much insight that was useful for my documentary, but that's not all. They inspired me to try my hand at a novel..."

The documentary film works in tandem with *MS: Behind the Scenes*, a live show, and *Point Source*, a fictional medical thriller already in print.

Directed by Ken Mandel, *Taking Back the Future: Voices of MS* centers around eight of these patients in different stages of MS and uses a fictional character, Margaret, to pull the stories together.

Well-known celebrities such as Joe Pesci, Ed Marinaro, Dennis Farina, James Darren, Helen Gurley Brown, Frankie Avalon, Jacklyn Zeman and Tom Dressen are featured reading actual letters submitted by MS patients to the website, but the real "stars" of the film are the patients themselves, whose everyday lives are affected. "In Hot Springs, MS stands for Movie Star," Dr. Pellegrino tells his patients.

Hot Springs is a key factor in many aspects of this project. The Documentary Film Institute was instrumental in the production of the film, namely in matching the producer and director.

This area is also the location for the book. The protagonist, Dr. Angela Donatelli runs a MS clinic and research center in Hot Springs. When an unusual outbreak of the disease breaks out in the fictional town of



Dr. Richard Pellegrino, and part of his staff, at his clinic and research facility in Hot Springs

Hammerstone, twenty miles away, Dr. Donatelli enlists the help of her MS patients in unraveling the mystery. They all become embroiled in the intrigue of an international conspiracy as the plot unfolds.

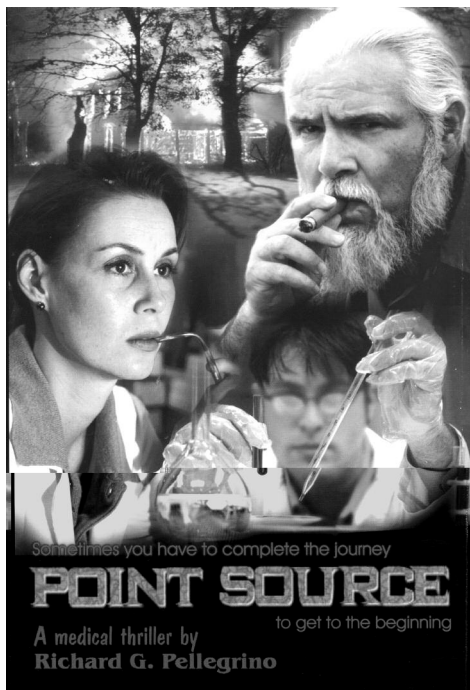
In *Point Source*, the first of a series of Dr. Donatelli mysteries, the author has successfully used fiction as a forum for education. Dr. Jack Burkes, the Chief Medical Officer of the Multiple Sclerosis Association of America wrote in the forward of the book, "He brings together his medical training and a profound appreciation of rural Arkansas and its people. His characters are well-drawn, his plotting is fast-paced, and his portrayal of the disease of MS and its impact on patients and the people who love them is insightful."

After the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival, Pellegrino will take his show on the road in an expanded format. *MS: Behind the Scenes* is a live show that combines entertainment by stage veteran and founder of the Bath House Show, Tom Wilkins, with scientific lectures by Pellegrino. Long-time friends, the pair has teamed up to get a message out in an entertaining way. "We give the audience something positive to hook into," Pellegrino explains. "The show is entertaining and educational, but most of all, it's fun!"

Wilkins, who has been an entertainer for over 20 years, warms the crowd up with music and family-oriented laughter, then Pellegrino talks to the audience about the disease in an informative manner.

Designed to draw two audiences, MS patients and their families plus the arts community, the show concludes with the powerful documentary.

Pellegrino is working with the Multiple Sclerosis Association to draw audiences across the country. Presentations, with no admission charge, are planned for cities in Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, and Mississippi in the coming months.



POINT SOURCE

Reception: October 1, during Gallery Walk. 5 - 9:00 p.m.

Dr. Pellegrino will be signing 1st Edition copies of his book, *Point Source*, Blue Moon Gallery, 719 Central Avenue

MS: BEHIND THE SCENES

Screenings at the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival Malco Theatre

Saturday, Oct. 23rd @ 2:45 p.m.
Question & answer session following with Producer Dr. Pellegrino and Director Ken Mandel
Book signing of *Point Source*, after the screening at Blue Moon Gallery, 719 Central Avenue

Tuesday, October 26th @ 1:15
Question and answer session following with Producer Dr. Pellegrino and Director Ken Mandel and Reception honoring MS patients at Justus Art Gallery, 827A Central

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