

Former PG photographer documents cancer battle

By Maria Sciallo
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By turning the camera lens on his own struggles, John Kaplan created a beacon for others dealing with cancer.

Mr. Kaplan, who won a 1992 Pulitzer Prize for feature photography, is a former Pittsburgh Post-Gazette photographer now on the faculty in the journalism department at the University of Florida, as well as Santa Fe College in Gainesville.

Diagnosed with two rare lymphomas in 2008, he picked up his camera early in the treatment process: "It was something truly spontaneous," he said recently.

From a photograph of his

10 p.m., a part of WQED's Filmmakers Corner series.

But Mr. Kaplan went beyond the usual filmmaker's role. Working with the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), he helped create a cancer coping kit for those affected by the disease.

Both a DVD of the film and the companion guide are available for free at NotAsIPictured.org and through Facebook.com/NotAsIPictured. So far, more than 6,000 copies have been given away to patients, caregivers and health care professionals.

"I see the movie as a conduit, as being part of a health community campaign," he said. ASCO's participation, he said, gave the project the credibility to move forward.

"It was very important to me not to release the film until I could vet it with cancer experts," said Mr. Kaplan, who has been in remission for more than a year.

Underwriters for "Not As I Pictured" include the Enlight Foundation of Palo Alto, Calif., and the American Cancer Society. The film's foundation also is a 501(c)3 and accepts donations to help with a traveling exhibition and other related events.

The 54-minute film opens with Mr. Kaplan explaining in voice-over that in 2008, he was misdiagnosed with a kidney tumor. His cancers — follicular and large B-cell non-Hodgkin lymphoma — were quickly discovered afterward, and he explains there is a history of blood cancers on his father's branch of the family tree.

In the film, there are photographs of one of his early assignments in Pittsburgh, shooting the story of a young woman cancer patient's last days. At one point, Mr. Kaplan stresses in voice-over: "As a photojournalist, you are always the observer and never the participant."

With "Not As I Pictured," he

became both.

"The process was a distraction from the tough reality that I faced, and yet at the same time, I had to remind myself my goal wasn't to make a movie, it was to stay alive," he said.

"It was a welcome distraction from my fear, but I would have stopped if it began to compromise my recovery."

The film is both somber and heartening, serving as inspiration to others who know the cancer treatment dance all too well. In his decision to include his family, Mr. Kaplan's journey and his desire to see his children all grown up become real.

"Not As I Pictured" won two CINE Golden Eagle awards and several best documentary titles at film festivals, and its soundtrack is a winner as well. Musicians Michael Stipe (R.E.M.), Chris Martin (Coldplay), David Bowie, will.i.am (Black Eyed Peas), Justin Timberlake, Pantera and Cowboy Junkies donated the use of their music.

In fact, Nick Anselmo, former vocalist for metal band Pantera, was filmed making the sort of surprise visit that would have done Oprah proud. It's an uplifting segment in the movie and takes the viewer outside Mr. Kaplan's tight world of hospitals and home.

Mother Teresa also puts in an appearance, although of course, not with Mr. Anselmo.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 11.7 million American are cancer survivors.

"There are so many cancer survivors, they're falling into the category of chronic illness," Mr. Kaplan said.

The film is receiving heartening feedback, and it's clear "Not As I Pictured" has struck a personal chord.

"I think, in a way, viewers see me as their metaphorical bartender, or hairdresser," Mr. Kaplan said. "And I answer every email."

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TV PREVIEW

'Not As I Pictured'

When: 10 p.m. Saturday on WQED.

ON THE WEB: See video at post-gazette.com.

hand, clutching hanks of black hair lost during his first round of chemotherapy, to video of a joyous birthday party at home with his wife, Li, and young children, Karina and Max, the resulting film, "Not As I Pictured," is upbeat but hardly

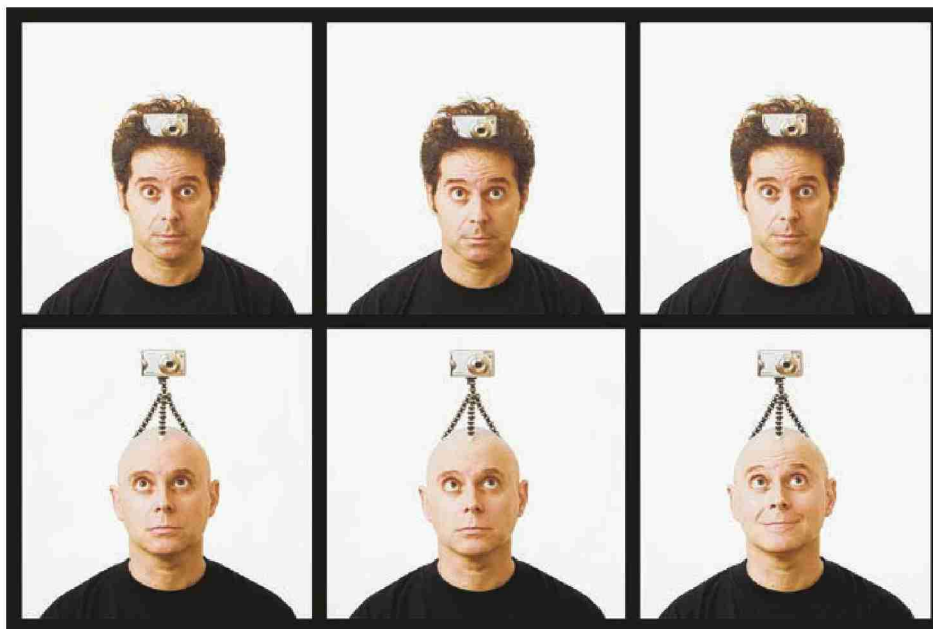
SEE **KAPLAN**, PAGE C-5

sugarcoated.

Mr. Kaplan took all of the still photography — sometimes using a remote to work the shutter — and about half of the video. Although it has won numerous independent film awards, its greatest feat is what it has accomplished on the small screen.

More than 40 PBS stations around the United States and Canada have broadcast "Not As I Pictured," with its Pittsburgh debut scheduled for Saturday at





"Not As I Pictured," a documentary by John Kaplan, is upbeat but hardly sugarcoated as it describes his battle with lymphoma. Mr. Kaplan, a former PG photographer who won a 1992 Pulitzer Prize, has been in remission for more than a year.