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Interview: PJ Raval and the Men of 'Before You Know It'

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on April 3, 2013 - 2:00pm in [Local Indies](#)



A title card at the beginning of Austin-based filmmaker [PJ Raval's](#) documentary *Before You Know It* ([Don's review](#)) states that an estimated 2.4 million self-identified gay, lesbian and transgendered senior citizens live in the U.S. Throughout the course of the movie, Ty Martin, Robert "One of the Ugliest Girls in the South" Mainer and Dennis Creamer transcend this statistic as we follow them from Rainbow Vistas in Gresham, Oregon, across to Harlem and south to Galveston. Raval's years-long research for the film brought him face-to-face with his own immortality and the discovery that LGBT seniors are half as likely to have health insurance and five times less likely to access social services than their heterosexual counterparts.

But Raval's subjects are more than just a number: They seek to educate audiences on a personal level and connect with them through their life stories. Like Creamer, a widower who didn't identify as gay until his 70s. *Before You Know It* follows him on dates with people he met on the Internet as he explores his "new" female identity under the name Dee. Or, Martin, who is an LGBT activist who lives in Harlem with his longtime partner Stanton. And Mainer, who struggles to retain his gay-friendly bar, Robert's Lafitte in Galveston, when confronted with legal troubles and his failing health.

I spoke with Raval, *Before You Know It* director/co-producer, and the documentary's cast an hour before its world premiere at this year's SXSW Film Festival. The film can next be seen at the [11th Annual Independent Film Festival Boston](#), which takes place April 24-30.

Slackerwood: What was your reaction when PJ approached you with this project?

Robert Mainer: I was all for it. I know so many people that's in the theater and I said, "So, why not?" You only live once, you better try it out.

Ty Martin: Well, it started out... he wanted to get some information and from there we started talking and we started recording, and he kept coming back. And two years later this is what happened. It just evolved and developed. It wasn't something that we sat down and said, "This is what I'd like for you to do. This is how we're going to do this." That didn't happen. He wanted some information and he came to my office and wanted to look at what we were doing. He wanted to see what my life was like when I wasn't working with the seniors. And then he wanted to come to the wedding of my friends. New York state was having its same-sex laws changed as we were doing Harlem Pride and Pride Weekend, so it all just kind of fell into place. But it wasn't some great vision.

Dennis Creamer: PJ can correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe it was an evolutionary process. He started filming at [Rainbow Vistas] and then just over time he just happened to pick me.

How did you feel about his choosing you?

Creamer: I'm greatly honored, of course, to be included in this. I appreciate it very much.

PJ, how did you choose your subjects and why did you choose those that you did?

PJ Raval: At first it was just purely instinctual, I guess. I met all three of them at different times, different places and I think immediately when I started asking them

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questions and finding out more about their lives I wanted to know more. So, it took off from there, in terms of just starting to follow them.

It wasn't, I think, up until when we started editing that I started seeing a connection between the three of them in a different way. And it's interesting because I haven't even told them this, but for me what's really interesting is I feel like there's almost a connection in a different way, other than just their being gay seniors.

I do feel like, what I was trying to do with the film, is it's also about aging and just looking at your life in general. I feel like each of the characters in the film are addressing a different stage in life almost. I feel like one of the stages is self-discovery. Although I feel like that can happen at any age, partnership and community is another, and legacy is another -- passing on what you've started to a future generation. For me, all three of the characters work as a whole in a different way that I didn't foresee in the beginning. To answer your initial question, it was purely just my first instinct.

Why is this topic important to you?

Raval: I think it's an important topic because it's widely overlooked. What's interesting is since this film has been getting some press, people have been coming up to me saying, "Wow, I haven't even thought of this or have seen anything about this," which is partially why I did it. It was also kind of inspired because my mother was getting older and she and I had been talking about her getting older and what that process involves and the idea of retiring and what she was going to do. It started making me think about my own life and how I don't think, or at the time I really didn't think a lot about it. And I started thinking about what will it be like when I'm of a certain age and especially in the LGBT community, which I think is a very youth-obsessed community. So, I think it's important to get these stories out there, for sure.

Mainer: Well, a lot of the young people nowadays don't realize the stuff that we had to go through. Police used to hit the bars and arrest everybody and print your name in the paper and you'd lose your job, for anything, they'd just hassle anybody. And then the kids in school, if you were gay, and they'd call you a sissy and they'd beat up on you and abuse you -- can't do it anymore. The gay kids have rights. Lots of us started standing up. When somebody'd hit me, I'd say, "You think you're gonna take a swing on me? I'll take one back on you." A lot of that, we've all gone through it. The new kids never had to do it.

Martin: One of the reasons why it's important this film be made or that I tell my story is that I sort of realized that there wasn't a lot of information out there for most people and I think a lot of us people caught up in the ageisms and homophobias, so many things that separate people, in particular the LGBT community.

Many of my constituents working for **SAGE** (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders) felt that they weren't entitled to basic qualities of life, so I think it was about re-educating people or letting people see that there is a life after 60. Unfortunately, too many of us are in isolation mode, be it not being around people, or we can be in an environment and still feel not connected.

Creamer: I think that some of the young people think that they're immortal, but sooner or later they're gonna get old and I think it's important to show what lies ahead.

What do you think people will get out of *Before You Know It*?

Raval: Aging doesn't discriminate. I think audiences will be surprised at how much they have in common with the three of these men right here.

How have your friends and family responded to the fact that you're in this film?

Martin: Thank God I'm a grownup. So, what can you do to me at 60-plus? The bottom line is that most people will be supportive, but I think it's something we all kind of wanted to have conversations about; we just haven't been able to really talk about.

Creamer: I have two nieces and one nephew. My nephew has no problems with my lifestyle. My nieces hopefully don't know about it. And of course, this film, pretty well outs me. However, anything that says "gay" in it they'd never watch, so perhaps they'll remain in blissful ignorance.

Visit the *Before You Know It* [Facebook page](#) to find out about the movie's upcoming screenings.