BROADCAST PREMIERE
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MR. CONNOLLY
Has ALS

FILMED, DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY DAN HABIB
FILM EDITOR DIEGO SIRAGNA
STORY EDITOR JODY BECKER
STORY CONSULTANT SAMUEL HABIB
FEATURING GENE CONNOLLY, PATTY CONNOLLY, SAMUEL HABIB AND THE STUDENTS OF CONCORD HIGH SCHOOL
MUSIC BY PHOENIX AND THE BEACH BOYS
PRODUCED BY D.H. PHOTOGRAPHY, LLC IN COLLABORATION WITH THE INSTITUTE ON DISABILITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

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electronic press kit
“Dan, I’ve been living with ALS for 20 plus years, and you did an awesome job showing how it is living with this diagnosis. Hugs to Gene for being brave enough to share his story.” - Bobbi

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For 14 years, Concord High School Principal Gene Connolly was always on the go. Whether in the press box at football games or greeting students at the start of every school day, he was an active, engaged leader who left a profound impression on the thousands of young people he guided during his 35 years as an educator.

Then, in 2014, the gregarious Connolly received news that would change the trajectory of his career and life forever. He was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), a neurological disease that attacks the nerve cells and leads to progressive muscle weakness and paralysis. He joined approximately 20,000 other Americans living with ALS, which typically results in death within 2-5 years.

Since the onset of his illness, Connolly showed tremendous persistence, humor, and leadership in the face of this degenerative, fatal disease. Connolly credits the school and the greater Concord community as a source of unfailing support and understanding as his illness progressed, allowing him to continue to lead the school for two years while also raising awareness about the disease locally, statewide, and nationally.

Connolly retired in June 2016, but the strength, positivity, and honesty that he demonstrated as he lost the ability to walk and speak will be his most profound legacy, particularly for the students who were part of his journey. Award-winning filmmaker and Concord High School parent, Dan Habib, has captured Connolly’s legacy in this 32-minute documentary film. Habib engaged the entire student body in a video interview process. Students submitted more than 1,000 questions (which were narrowed down to 50) that examined themes such as how to live life fully; develop resilience; show love freely; identify priorities; what it feels like to acquire a disability; how people perceive individuals with disabilities; and how to approach an inevitable death with honesty and dignity.

As Connolly says in an interview for the film, his ALS has taught him a deeper understanding of what it means to be disabled. “While I look different, inside I am the same person,” he said. “It can be frustrating and exhausting. I have a newfound respect for people with disabilities.”
Mr. Connolly on Disability Rights: 
As my ALS symptoms have become more pronounced, I have noticed when people approach me they speak with me differently. They think the disease has affected my cognitive abilities. It can be frustrating and exhausting. I have a newfound respect for people with disabilities.

MR. CONNOLLY HAS ALS
(2017, 32 minutes)
A film by Dan Habib

During his 14-year tenure at Concord High School, Principal Gene Connolly was known for his non-stop energy, his love of rock & roll, and the personal connections he made with many of the school’s 1,600 students. However, in 2014, Connolly received a devastating diagnosis: Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, or ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease). Since the onset of his illness, Connolly showed tremendous persistence, humor, and leadership in the face of this degenerative and fatal disease. Connolly credits the school and the greater Concord community as a source of unfailing support and understanding as his illness progressed.

Mr. Connolly Has ALS chronicles Connolly’s final year as principal of the school, when his physical abilities are significantly limited. The outpouring of love and support from the students, evident as they engage with him in the film, is both remarkable and inspiring.
About the FILM TEAM

Dan Habib
Director/Producer/Cinematographer

Dan Habib is the creator of the award-winning documentary films Including Samuel, Who Cares About Kelsey?, Mr. Connolly Has ALS and many other short films on education and disability-related topics. Habib is a filmmaker at the University of New Hampshire’s Institute on Disability, and he is currently working on a new documentary, Intelligent Lives, which examines our society’s perceptions of intelligence.

Habib’s feature Including Samuel was broadcast nationally on public television stations in the fall of 2009, and Who Cares About Kelsey? aired on public television in the fall of 2013. Both films were nominated for Emmy Awards and featured in dozens of film festivals. Including Samuel has been translated into 17 languages and is used as a teaching tool worldwide.

In 2012, Habib received the Champion of Human and Civil Rights Award from the National Education Association, and in 2013, he received the Justice for All Grassroots Award from the American Association of People with Disabilities. In November 2013, Habib delivered a TEDx talk titled “Disabling Segregation” on the benefits of inclusive education.

In 2014, Habib was appointed by President Barack Obama to the President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities—a committee that promotes policies and initiatives that support independence and lifelong inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.

Habib and his wife, Betsy, live in Concord, New Hampshire with their sons Isaiah, 21, and Samuel, 17.

Mr. Connolly On Resiliency:
You will face adversity. Life is full of challenges. We get little say in what happens to us, but everything to say in how we deal with it. In fact, our response will define us.
About the The Film Team (continued)

Diego Siragna
Editor


Jody Becker
Story Editor

Jody Becker is an award-winning documentary film, radio, and print journalist. As a writer and story editor, she collaborates with directors who highlight issues ranging from public policy to health (Autistic-Like, Voices) and the arts. As an on-air reporter and producer at Chicago Public Radio for a decade, her work was frequently heard on NPR’s “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered,” and the highly acclaimed public radio business show, “Marketplace.” She’s also worked as an editor on “Weekend All Things Considered,” and her stories have appeared in The New York Times.com and the Atlantic.com, The Los Angeles Times, The Huffington Post, Variety, and other newspapers and magazines.

Samuel Habib
Story Consultant

Samuel Habib, age 17, is a senior at Concord (NH) High School. He is on the school yearbook staff, the school television station, plays unified track, basketball and soccer, and he is part of the Be The Change Club, which organizes multicultural events at the school. Samuel plans to attend college to become a multi-media story teller, and he recently made a film about disability rights leader Judith Heumann that was featured in the 2016 Breaking Down Barriers Film Festival in Moscow.

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(Founders Dennis Palmieri & Desiree Gutierrez)

Distribution

Impact Media Partners LLC is your one-stop shop for communications, audience engagement, and media consulting services. Our team offers decades of experience in media promotion, engagement and distribution management, high-level non-profit strategy and leadership, corporate communications, and a strong network of skilled professionals around the country in media production, education, community engagement, publicity, and more.

“This story/film needs to be seen in medical schools - would be awesome for these new potential doctors!”

-Chris
About Mr. Connolly

Gene Connolly's commitment to young people and their education is both extraordinary and inspiring. During his 14 years as principal at Concord High School, he was committed to including students with disabilities, as well as English language learners, into the general education population. His commitment to inclusive education helped earn him the honor of New Hampshire High School Principal of the Year in 2014.

That same year, the gregarious Connolly was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), a neurological disease that attacks the nerve cells and leads to progressive muscle weakness and paralysis. He joined approximately 20,000 other Americans living with ALS, which typically results in death within 2-5 years.

Connolly continued to lead Concord High School for two years after receiving his diagnosis, while also raising awareness about the disease locally, statewide, and nationally. He lost his ability to speak, then his ability to walk, but he continued to lead the school – using a walker and scooter for mobility and an iPad for communication. However, in 2016 he realized that he no longer had the energy to continue working, and he retired in June of that year.

Connolly continues to advocate for ALS awareness and inclusive education.

Mr. Connolly On Empathy:

Losing my ability to speak has forced me to be a better listener. Now I hear more than a person's words. I have a greater sensitivity to a person’s tone, the nonverbal message that is every bit as important as the words.
A Message From Mr. Connolly

I’d like to start by thanking Dan Habib and his creative team. In order to make this relatively short film, Dan has had to spend countless hours conducting interviews, attending events, and pouring through old footage. It isn’t easy making me look this good. Just ask Dan.

I have found that I am blessed in so many ways. First and foremost is my family. The love, care, kindness, and support they give to me is overwhelming. I am grateful for all that they do for me and with me everyday. They are true heroes.

Next are all the friends who continue to visit and keep in touch with me. ALS is intimidating. It is difficult for some to deal with all of the physical changes that are happening to me. But you all must remember that I am still the same person inside. I am still that person that loves to know what is happening in your daily lives, your jobs, and with your families. I look different, but I am the same. Remember that.

Next is Concord High and the Concord community. The outpouring of love I feel from past students, parents, and teachers whenever I go out always amazes me. So many people toot their horns, give a wave, stop and talk…I can feel so much love.

Now, I’d like to talk about the message of the film and what it means to me. In order to be an effective educator, it is essential that you have a vision—that you have a vision based on a strong philosophy. Over the years, aspects of my philosophy and vision have evolved. It’s grown with educational research and it’s been tweaked and adjusted by best practice. No matter what your career, it is important to stay current.

Throughout my career, one of my core beliefs was inclusion. The importance of inclusion was first instilled in me during my time at Springfield College and my early work as an elementary physical education teacher. I saw the tangible benefits in the classroom and the gym.

Those benefits included the type of cooperation that occurs when you have students with a range of abilities working closely together. The type of collaboration that occurs directly correlates to real-world skills—skills that help our entire student body become more empathetic, more understanding, well-rounded citizens. I truly believe that our public schools are the spaces where we have to be pushing for inclusion—that by pushing for inclusion in this space, it ripples out into our communities and into our world.

Since my diagnosis, the importance of inclusion has become more clear now than ever. Not only is it a theoretical philosophy, now it is a practical reality for me.

This experience reminds me of a line from the Robert Frost poem “Into My Own”: “They would not find me changed from him they knew — Only more sure of all I thought was true.” This experience has only made me more sure that inclusion is an essential part of education and life.
About the Partners

University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability

The Institute on Disability (IOD) was established in 1987 to provide a university-based focus for the improvement of knowledge, policies, and practices related to the lives of people with disabilities and their families, and is New Hampshire’s University Center for Excellence in Disability (UCED). Located within the University of New Hampshire, the IOD is a federally designated center authorized by the Developmental Disabilities Act. Through innovative and interdisciplinary research, academic, service, and dissemination initiatives, the IOD builds local, state, and national capacities to respond to the needs of individuals with disabilities and their families.

University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability has provided funding to this film.

ALS Association

Established in 1985, The ALS Association is the only national non-profit organization fighting Lou Gehrig’s Disease on every front. By leading the way in global research, providing assistance for people with ALS through a nationwide network of chapters, coordinating multidisciplinary care through certified clinical care centers, and fostering government partnerships, The Association builds hope and enhances quality of life while aggressively searching for new treatments and a cure.

As the preeminent ALS organization, The Association leads the way in research, care services, public education, and public policy — giving help and hope to those facing the disease. The Association’s nationwide network of chapters provides comprehensive patient services and support to the ALS community. The mission of The ALS Association is to lead the fight to treat and cure ALS through global research and nationwide advocacy, while also empowering people with Lou Gehrig’s Disease and their families to live fuller lives by providing them with compassionate care and support.

The ALS Association is an engagement and educational partner of the film; they did not provide production funding.

“I wish all schools and communities were this caring and inclusive.” - Emilie
What is ALS?

ALS, or Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. A-myotrophic comes from the Greek language. “A” means no. “Myo” refers to muscle, and “Trophic” means nourishment – “No muscle nourishment.” When a muscle has no nourishment, it “atrophy”s or wastes away. “Lateral” identifies the areas in a person’s spinal cord where portions of the nerve cells that signal and control the muscles are located. As this area degenerates, it leads to scarring or hardening (“sclerosis”) in the region.

Motor neurons reach from the brain to the spinal cord and from the spinal cord to the muscles throughout the body. The progressive degeneration of the motor neurons in ALS eventually leads to their demise. When the motor neurons die, the ability of the brain to initiate and control muscle movement is lost. With voluntary muscle action progressively affected, people may lose the ability to speak, eat, move, and breathe. The motor nerves that are affected when you have ALS are the motor neurons that provide voluntary movements and muscle control. Examples of voluntary movements are making the effort to reach for a smart phone or step off a curb. These actions are controlled by the muscles in the arms and legs.

There are two different types of ALS, sporadic and familial. Sporadic, which is the most common form of the disease in the U.S., accounts for 90 to 95 percent of all cases. It may affect anyone, anywhere. Familial ALS (FALS) accounts for 5 to 10 percent of all cases in the U.S. Familial ALS means the disease is inherited. In those families, there is a 50 percent chance each offspring will inherit the gene mutation and may develop the disease. French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot discovered the disease in 1869.

Recent years have brought a wealth of new scientific understanding regarding the physiology of this disease. There is currently one FDA-approved drug, Riluzole, that modestly slows the progression of ALS in some people. Although there is not yet a cure or treatment that halts or reverses ALS, scientists have made significant progress in learning more about this disease. In addition, people with ALS may experience a better quality of life in living with the disease by participating in support groups and attending an ALS Association Certified Treatment Center of Excellence or a Recognized Treatment Center.

“It is such a beautiful, powerful story that our world needs to hear now more than ever.” - Christina
What is ALS? (continued)

ALS usually strikes people between the ages of 40 and 70, and it is estimated that there are more than 20,000 Americans who have the disease at any given time (although this number fluctuates). For unknown reasons, military veterans are approximately twice as likely to be diagnosed with the disease as the general public.

Notable individuals who have been diagnosed with ALS include baseball great Lou Gehrig, theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and author Stephen Hawking, Hall of Fame pitcher Jim “Catfish” Hunter, Toto bassist Mike Porcaro, Senator Jacob Javits, and actor David Niven, among many others.

Mr. Connolly On Expression:

When I was in high school and college, it was the height of un-coolness to tell someone that you love them. Well I am going to give you permission to break the rule. The new rule is if you love someone, you have to tell them.
Film Resources

ONLINE

site: MRCONNOLLYHASALS.ORG
facebook.com/MrConnollyHasALS
@_danhabib

ASSETS

Connolly with Sevignee Mugisha (JPG)
Gene Connolly 2016 Graduation (JPG)
Film Poster (PDF)

TRAILERS

"Mr. Connolly Has ALS" official trailer
Official Trailer

Mr. Connolly Has ALS extended trailer
Extended Trailer