

# Brotherly Love

The documentary *Imagining Robert* takes a close look at the impact of mental illness on one family

By Amy Kroin

Back in 1973, Anne Neugeboren decided to do what so many Jewish women of a certain age choose to do: pack her bags and move to Florida. But Anne's desire to relocate from her longtime home in Brooklyn was not motivated by visions of canasta games played out under a West Palm Beach sun. Anne wanted to leave because she wanted to flee her youngest son, Robert, who had had his first mental breakdown a decade earlier at the age of 19.

After years of watching Robert move in and out of hospitals, after years of watching his diagnosis change from schizophrenia to manic depression to hypomania, after years of watching him move from one failed medication regime to the next, Anne Neugeboren had had enough. And so there came an evening when she told her husband that she wanted them to get the hell out of Dodge. David Neugeboren's reaction, recounted in the new Florentine Films documentary *Imagining Robert*, was one of horror.

"I beg of you," he said, down on his knees before his wife. "One does not abandon a child."

But for Anne, there was no other alternative. Having a child with mental illness, she once said, is worse than death. And so she persuaded her husband to move to Florida, and she saw her youngest son just two more times in her life before she died of Alzheimer's disease more than 20 years later. On one of those occasions — at a bar mitzvah for a family member — Anne did not even recognize Robert. Extending her hand, she introduced herself. "Hello," she said, "I'm Anne Neugeboren."

The story of this mother's reaction to her son's disease is explored in memorable effect in *Imagining Robert: My Brother, Madness, and Survival*. The film, which will premiere this Sunday at Smith College, is based on the acclaimed memoir written by Robert's older brother Jay Neugeboren, an award-winning novelist, essayist and short story writer who taught in UMass' MFA program until he retired last May.

Shot on video, with occasionally fuzzy audio, this one-hour film adaptation of Neugeboren's memoir was directed by Haydenville resident Lawrence Hott and edited by his wife Diane Garey, the team behind such noted documentaries as *Divided Highways*. Aware that there are already a great many films dealing with the medical roots and cultural consequences of mental illness, Hott and Garey set out to make a piece that explores the impact of this disease on one particular family.

At the center of *Imagining Robert* are the Neugeboren brothers, one a gifted writer and father of three, the other a man who has lived most of his adult life shuttered away from the broader culture.

"For 37 years," writes Hott in his director's notes, "[Robert] has lived within the mental health system, his treatment and prognosis changing with each new doctor and each new 'cure.' He has been in state hospitals, city hospi-

tals, halfway houses, group homes, jail cells, elite treatment centers, forensic hospitals, and, for brief periods, in his own apartments. He has been treated with gas inhalation, insulin coma therapy, four-point restraints, and virtually the entire armamentaria of neuroleptic and psychotropic drugs. Through the years he's also participated in group therapy, family therapy, multifamily group therapy, psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy, art therapy, behavioral therapy, vocational rehabilitation therapy, and milieu therapy. Most often, though, he has had an abundance of drugs and a sad lack of care."

And through it all he's had a brother who has served as his best friend and primary caretaker.

tion, no commentary from experts in the field, no attempt to draw neat conclusions from the material at hand. Instead, the brothers themselves occupy center stage, and through their words we become aware of how it is possible, as Jay himself notes, to live a rich life while coping with mental illness.

Early on in the film Jay recalls a time when Robert was doing well enough to justify being moved out of the locked ward he had been confined to at Staten Island's South Beach Psychiatric Center. Robert's psychiatrist dismissed Jay's suggestion with the flip retort: "Talk to the governor." Jay proceeded to do just that, penning a letter to then-Gov. Cuomo, asking whether

and dedicated staff. What's most profound is the degree of freedom afforded Robert, who is allowed to come and go as he pleases.

The film follows the brothers as they go on outings to a Chinese restaurant, to Lieberman's Photo Studio, to their old high school in Brooklyn. Sometimes Robert is a charmer; other times he's ornery. There's a sense of world-weariness in Jay's response to the more combative behavior; it's clear that he's been down this path many times before. But what emerges most vividly is the depth of the connection between the two brothers. Jay looks out for Robert, but he doesn't patronize him. At one point, as the two are about to embark on a walk, he reaches out to his brother. "You OK?" he asks. "You need to lean on me a little?"

Jay Neugeboren has spent much of his life taking care of other people: his brother, his mother during her struggle with Alzheimer's, his three children, whom he raised as a single parent. He's measured throughout the film, but there are points where a sense of exhaustion comes through.

Robert, for his part, emerges as the life of the party. In his youth an accomplished actor, writer and athlete, he's got a wry sense of humor and an enduring spirit of independence. It's clear that he doesn't want to be coddled; he wants to exercise his right to make his own decisions, to have some degree of ownership over his life. "I'm a little wacky, that's all," he says at one point.

The weight of the past bears down on both brothers in this documentary. We learn that Anne Neugeboren worked full-time to support the family, that David Neugeboren was a failed businessman, that Robert's first breakdown — during which he tried to strangle his father and seduce his mother — flew in the face of all the promise he had shown during his childhood.

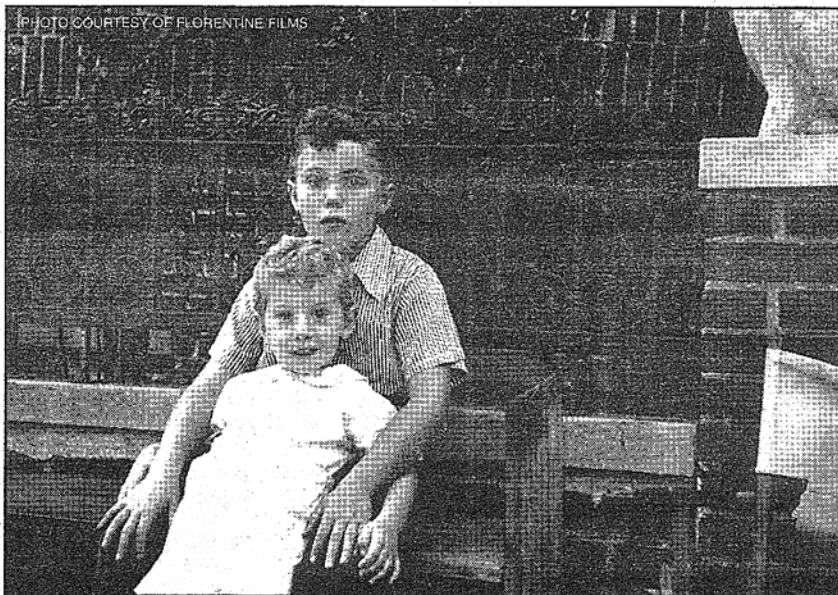
One of the most moving moments comes when Jay recalls his mother's decision to leave Robert; we see Jay talking to the camera, and then both brothers reviewing the footage on video. "I'm crying," says Robert.

"So am I," says Jay.

The film charts a journey for the brothers, posing implicitly the question of whether Robert will be able to make it at Project Renewal. But within that question is a more complicated one about the way our culture responds to mental illness. This spare and deliberate film provokes debate without preaching — a testament to the filmmakers' restraint, and to the two brothers who have opened their lives here.

In the end, what the film illustrates, more than anything else, is that it's not enough to endure. It's far better, as Robert's example reveals, to live.

*Imagining Robert* will be shown at 7:30 p.m. at Wright Hall at Smith College in Northampton on Sun., April 28. Both brothers will be present at the screening.



Jay (rear) and Robert Neugeboren as children in Brooklyn.

Anne Neugeboren passed the torch to Jay when she decided to escape to Florida. "You be in charge from now on, Jay," she said. "I just can't handle it anymore."

It would have been all too easy to wring a three-hanky film out of the story behind *Imagining Robert*. Just consider the possibilities: You've got a man treated like a number within the mental health system, you've got parents who have gone AWOL, you've got a devoted older brother looking out for his younger sibling. Robin Williams would jump at the material.

Fortunately, Hott and Garey — who have won an Emmy, a Peabody and two Academy Award nominations for their various films — take a cue from Jay Neugeboren's approach in his memoir and steer away from manipulative or familiar storytelling techniques. And they get out of the way of their subject: There's no narra-

there might be some way out for his brother.

The action of writing the letter in and of itself is significant, for it shows what Robert has that so many in his position do not: an advocate willing and able to do everything within his power to help. And, years later, the act of writing *Imagining Robert* did a great deal for Robert Neugeboren — the reaction to the book was so strong that Jay heard from many people in the mental health field who were determined to find a better way for Robert.

And so, two years after the book's publication, Robert is no longer institutionalized. When the film opens in 1999 he's living at Project Renewal, a residence for mentally ill and formerly homeless people. There's a huge contrast between the hospitals Robert has spent much of his life in — places where he was beaten up and locked in solitary — and this sunny facility with its Diego Rivera prints and plush furnishings