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Film director Aron Gaudet, right, lets his mother, Joan Gaudet, speak about her part of his film "The Way We Get By" during a breakfast talk Wednesday at Pines Village Retirement Community in Valparaiso. Gaudet directed the film about his mother and her friends who greet American troops returning to the United States at the Bangor, Maine airport.

Movie opens eyes

Film director tells Pines Village he learned the richness of senior's lives

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VALPARAISO | It's 11 p.m. — do you know where your parent is?

Experiencing that worry of the adult child led to the creation of the award-winning film "The Way We Get By," director Aron Gaudet told an audience of 100 at Pines Village Retirement Communities on Wednesday.

"Suddenly she was never home," Gaudet said of his 76-year-old mother Joan.

He learned his mother was making frequent visits to Bangor International Airport, the first point of entry for many returning servicemen and women from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Joan Gaudet had become one of the Maine Troop Greeters, volunteers who welcome each flight and provide soldiers, Marines, airmen and sailors with hugs,

handshakes, cell phones and cookies.

Following along on a 2 a.m. greeting, Aron Gaudet found a dedicated group of mostly senior citizen greeters — and a compelling topic for his next project.

That first night, he met troop greeter Bill Knight, a World War II veteran who had been diagnosed with prostate cancer earlier that day.

Soon the documentary evolved from a story about welcoming troops to one about more universal themes, Aron Gaudet said.

The film's three subjects deal with loneliness, loss, health problems and — for Joan Gaudet — the departure of two grandchildren for overseas service.

But when the three were having down days, Aron Gaudet said, he repeatedly saw their spirits lift upon receiving notice of an incoming flight.

Their effort became a double-edged sword, Aron Gaudet said, taking a physical toll on the elderly greeters, but also giving them purpose.

"They weren't quitting," Aron Gaudet said, saying their perseverance inspired him to stick with the project.

The film has garnered 17 festival awards and aired on the PBS series

"POV" last Veterans Day.

Speaking tours about the film have taken Joan Gaudet to Hollywood where she met actor Morgan Freeman and to a White House meeting with Vice President Joe Biden.

But when she's away, she said, she feels a bit of withdrawal not knowing what's going on at the airport.

Pines Village's annual celebration of senior citizens during National Older Americans Month provides an opportunity to showcase people who have made a positive contribution, CEO Laurie Mullet said.

The event advances Pines Village's mission to encourage positive aging marked by purpose, passion and perseverance, Mullet said.

Those are qualities Pines Village wants for its residents and the city community as a whole, she said.

"We're all aging," Mullet said, adding the United States lags behind many other countries in respecting the wisdom that comes with age.

For her part, Joan Gaudet was impressed with the food and friendliness at Pines Village.

"I could live here easy," she said.