Two members of Robert Lemieux's film crew, left, with Chuck and Anita Stapleton, right. The Stapletons' property in Lutherville is home to the country's largest American elm tree. **ROBERT LEMIEUX/COURTESY**

'Maryland's Champion Trees' featured in new film premiering in Westminster

By Gabriella Fine

Guy Semmes standing in front of the Travilah Oak, which is over 300 years old. **ROBERT LEMIEUX/COURTESY**

At the base of the largest American elm tree in the country, a film crew of three stood with Anita and Chuck Stapleton. The Stapletons' property in Lutherville is home to a champion tree, and is one of the subjects of Robert Lemieux's film, "Growing Into Greatness: Maryland's Champion Trees." The film showcases champion trees and stories of how they have moved and inspired humans. It premieres Friday at the Carroll Arts Center in Westminster.

The film honors the grandeur of Maryland's Champion Trees — also known as Big Trees or Witness Trees — which are defined as being the largest trees of their species. "Growing Into Greatness" will be broadcast on Maryland Public Television later this year, honoring the Maryland Big Tree Program's Centennial.

Lemieux noted the sequence of little miracles that must occur for a tree to grow to a breathtaking size, while other trees often don't even grow to maturity.

"You look at this giant white oak that's 300-and-something years old, and you say, 'How did this tree survive?'" he said.

Anne Hairston-Strang, director and state forester for the Maryland Forest Service in the Department of Natural Resources, described how people often find big trees emotionally moving and said she likes to imagine the history that the trees have witnessed.

"Thinking about the longevity of many of them, you know, a lot of times it's longer than some of our human lifespans," she said.

Leading a crew of three, Lemieux directed, wrote and edited the film. While the filmmaking operation was nimble, the project was supported by multiple parties, including Maryland Public Television, a Carroll County Arts Council Community Arts Development Grant, and McDaniel College, where Lemieux serves as an associate professor of communication and cinema.

In 2015, Lemieux began to think about how he would approach the project after a conversation with a master gardener in his neighborhood taught him about the champion tree program in 2015.

In late 2023, Lemieux reached out to Maryland Public Television to gauge interest in the project. Next, he connected with the Maryland Big Tree program and Department of Natural Resources for further guidance. In the spring of 2024, the team began filming.

Jenifer Patterson, marketing and communications coordinator for the Carroll County Arts Council, described the collaboration the project has inspired.

"This was a passion project for Robert ... but the way that it's brought people together, I think, has really been beautiful, a beautiful thing," she said.

The film combines new interviews and footage captured by Lemieux and his team, with archival material from the Maryland State Archives.

The film will be screened Friday at 7:30 p.m. at the Carroll Arts Center at 91 W. Main St. in Westminster. The screening is free and tickets are not required.

Lemieux hopes viewers will come away with a greater appreciation for their natural surroundings, whether it's a champion tree or "it's your own backyard."

Have a news tip? Contact Gabriella Fine at gfine@baltsun.com or at 443-900-1296.