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Fallstrom: Balamos film featured at festival

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"Come Unto Me," a music video created to honor the musical compositions of the late John Balamos of Decatur, is among 12 films chosen for the online film festival Byzanfest.

Directed and produced by Georgia Greanias Casciato of Chicago, Balamos's niece, the video is the story of Epaminondas "Pete" Balamos, who emigrated to the U.S. from Greece in 1904. The Byzantine music score was composed by his son, John, with a choir composed of Millikin University students.

"It chronicles the personal fortitude of early 20th century immigrants searching for a better life." Casciato explains.

The music dates from 1952, honoring John Balamos's siblings, Dino and Bess. The video was created in 2013 to launch the online Balamos music legacy. The website (www.johnbalamos.com) has had nearly 100,000 hits.

John Balamos (1927-2011) was noted as a passionate New Yorker with humble beginnings. He left a reputation as an accomplished pianist, music teacher and composer.

"His passions were simple," said Dino Balamos of Decatur: "Music, family and New York City."

He was particularly involved with the 92nd Street Y. "He had an extraordinary impact on our organization, he was an inspirational human being," said Jo Frances Brown, director of the Y's senior program.

Trained in the classics, including study with Elizabeth Travis of Millikin University, his early compositions mixed Eastern/Greek Orthodoxy and Byzantine music in choral pieces such as, "In the Shelter of Thy Wings," "Out of Thy Depths" and "Come Unto Me."

Byzanfest began in 2014 in Australia. It's an international film festival promoted on YouTube with contributions from global Orthodox Christian filmmakers. Screenings for Byzanfest 2015 are scheduled for Irvine, Calif.; Ottawa, Canada; and Melbourne, Australia. Plans are being made for a Chicago showing, Casciato said.

Casciato, 56, owns a healthcare business and strategy consultancy working with hospitals, physicians, health technologies and health associations. Early on, she sold advertising for the Herald & Review.

Casciato's video opens as Pete Balamos arrives in a new country penniless, without language knowledge and without work skills. He finds a job in the Chicago stockyards and teams up with James Kareotes. They decide to become businessmen and go to Danville to learn about confectionaries.

In 1908, the men settle in Decatur and open the American Ice Cream Co.

Balamos goes back to Greece at age 42 and brings back an 18-year-old bride, Dioneia. Three children are born. Greek heritage begins, especially with the building of the Greek Annunciation Church in 1927.

Fascinated with history, Casciato observes: "It was truly a leap of faith and belief that God had a plan for my uncle. This is a story of gratitude, personal responsibility, work ethic and social contribution passed to future generations."

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