

# Orlando Sentinel LIVING



Billy Flanigan poses with an award he received from Walt Disney World in this image from the documentary "Billy Flanigan: Happiest Man on Earth." TH ANGEL PRODUCTIONS/COURTESY PHOTOS

## SMILES AND PAIN Disney World's Billy Flanigan hits the big screen

By Matthew J. Palm  
Orlando Sentinel

With a smile and a song, longtime Walt Disney World performer Billy Flanigan pedaled his way onto the big screen with the story of how his sunny persona masked personal shadows.

A documentary on Flanigan, who gained national attention by delivering singing telegrams via his trusty bicycle to cheer friends and colleagues during the COVID-19 shutdown, will make its world premiere Oct. 1 at the Garden Theatre in Winter Garden.

"I'm nervous, happy, scared, excited," said Flanigan, a Disney entertainer for 40 years in shows such as "Tarzan Rocks," the "Hoop-Dee-Do Musical Revue," "Finding Nemo: The Big Blue ... And Beyond!" and "For the First Time in Forever: A Frozen Sing-Along Celebration."

"I'm still wrapping my brain around this," he said.

Titled "Billy Flanigan: The Happiest Man on Earth," the documentary first started as a short film detailing Flanigan's "Flanigrams." In June 2020, while the entertainment industry was at a standstill and people were isolating in their homes, Flanigan began biking to friends' front doors and surprising them with a socially distanced song and dance — eventually logging thousands of miles making hundreds of visits. An Orlando Sentinel report on the phenomenon was distributed nationwide, and caught the eye of California-based actor-screenwriter Cullen Douglas. He told his producing partner Randy Goodwin, "I think there's a little short film here, a feel-good story we could tell."

But after speaking with Flanigan, Douglas realized there was much more to the story.

"This was really a documentary about a man who followed his heart and dreams and faced adversity and came to the other side of it," Douglas said. "Behind that 1,000-watt smile, he was going through a lot of turmoil."

The documentary features about 40 interviews with childhood friends of Flanigan, family members and Disney co-workers. It delves into the bullying Flanigan faced as a youth, and the turmoil that rocked his then-wife and children when he came out as gay after years of struggling with his sexuality.

His ex-wife participated in the documentary.

"I love how the film shows her as a hero," said Flanigan, 62. "That, to me, was worth everything."

Douglas said Flanigan's story represents all Central Florida entertainers, who despite personal struggles make sure the show goes on.

"All those performers down in Orlando, yes, they are entertaining you but they are dealing with their hardships and life issues," he said. "The documentary is not only a love letter to Billy and all those who make sacrifices to entertain us, it's also a love letter to the culture that's been created there in Central Florida."

Disney fans will see familiar faces in the film, including performer and longtime friend Sheila Ward: "I knew she would make fun of me. She sure did," Flanigan said.

Pianist Carol Stein, who plays at various Epcot venues, wrote an original theme song for the film.

Coincidentally, Douglas and Flanigan both worked at Disney World during the 1990s — though they never met. However, Douglas knew of Flanigan by reputation.

"As I was learning about Disney, one of the first things I heard about was Billy Flanigan," said Douglas, who performed at the Adventurers Club at Pleasure Island. "Everyone would talk about him: 'He's exactly the guy Walt Disney would want in these parks.'"

The two connected through mutual friend Andrea Canny, who became a producer on the film — "She worked her butt off," Flanigan said.

Douglas would not specify the film's budget, which originally was going to be partially funded by online crowd sourcing. But realizing that many of the donors had lost their jobs during the pandemic, the online fund drive was shut down and the money refunded.

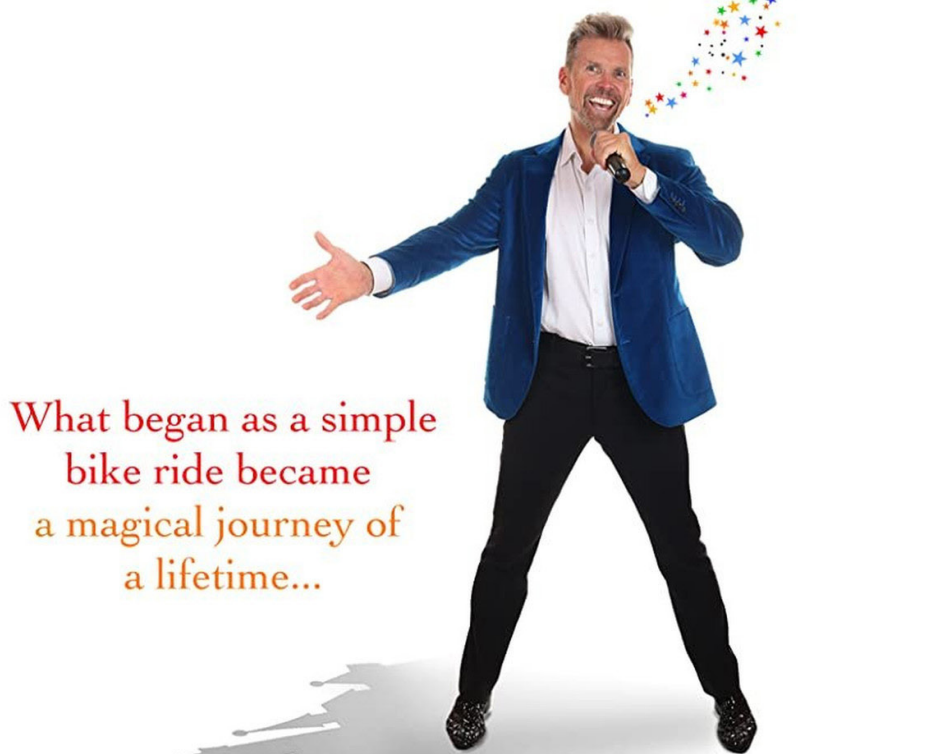
"We realized we were asking people to help who didn't know how they were going to pay their mortgages," Douglas said. "We didn't feel right about it."

This weekend's premiere will feature question-and-answer sessions hosted by WKMG-Channel 6's Crystal Moyer. The Orlando TV station will celebrate the film with on-air segments all week and sponsor an encore presentation of the film on Oct. 2 for members of its WKMG Insider program.

Proceeds from ticket sales to the premiere will benefit JDRE, which fights Type I diabetes, a cause close to Flanigan's heart for family reasons.

He joked that he might ride his bike to the red-carpet premiere — but the producers thought a limousine would be more appropriate.

"My grandkids are absolutely



What began as a simple bike ride became a magical journey of a lifetime...

GOOD DEED ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS A 12TH ANGEL PRODUCTION OF A CULLEN DOUGLAS DOC  
 BILLY FLANIGAN: THE HAPPIEST MAN ON EARTH DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN VONMUTIUS LEAD EDITOR JEREMY M. GILLECE COMPOSER ROB POTTORF  
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"Billy Flanigan: Happiest Man on Earth," a documentary about the veteran Walt Disney World performer, will debut Oct. 1 in a premiere at the Garden Theatre in Winter Garden.

going to eat that up," he said.

Following the premiere, "The Happiest Man on Earth" will be released on demand Oct. 7 on Amazon, Apple TV/iTunes, VUDU and Google Play. The film is available for preorder on DVD at amazon.com.

Flanigan has watched "The Happiest Man on Earth" only once — "I cried like a baby," he said — but he is a fan.

"I could not have told my story as well as [Douglas] did," he said. "He handled it with so much grace."

He still can't quite believe that his "Flanigrams" have led to this moment.

"The fact that something so silly and simple made such a difference in other people's lives ...," Flanigan mused. "That's what I do at Disney, and why I don't

want to ever leave. Every day, I'm putting smiles on people's faces."

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