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Aging Research Day features film and novelist

Helen Adams | MUSC News Center | February 23, 2016



Image courtesy of Una Vida

Aunjanue Ellis and Bill Cobbs star in the movie "Of Mind and Music," which is based on a novel by the keynote speaker for MUSC's Aging Research Day.

A woman with a beautiful voice captivates a neuroscientist in the French Quarter of New Orleans. He stops and listens in awe. Then he learns she has an early onset form of Alzheimer's disease, and his training kicks in. He sets off to learn about this amazing woman's life before her memory disappears.

So begins the novel "Una Vida: A Fable of Music and the Mind" by neuroscientist [Nicolas Bazan, M.D., Ph.D.](#) He'll discuss the story, which has also been made into the movie "Of Mind and Music," as the keynote speaker at the Medical University of South Carolina's [Aging Research Day](#) conference on February 26. The theme of the event is "Sensory systems in aging," inspired in part by Bazan's movie, which opens in select theaters nationwide March 4.



nicolasbazanwine.com

Dr. Nicolas Bazan

spotlight the themes of his story and the details of his research but also to hold up Bazan himself as an example.

The 73-year-old Argentine-born researcher retains a sharp mind and a range of interests that include wine, music and art. His love of art led to an introduction to the the 94-year-old artist Francoise Gilot, famous for her relationship with Pablo Picasso but also acclaimed in her own right. Bazan plans to discuss her longevity during his talk.

Bazan said his story of a singer slipping into dementia, including an exploration of the changes that take place in the brain and efforts to combat the disease, is a way to send an important message.

“Writing the novel and contributing to making the movie is a way to go to the larger community to tell them about the significance of what we neuroscientists do,” Bazan said. “Otherwise, our work in the lab does not reach the broad community. People need to realize the magnitude of the problem of Alzheimer's disease. This movie shows them that and also sends a message of hope.”

The [MUSC Center on Aging](#) invited the New Orleans-based scientist to speak about his book, movie and work not only to



Dr. Lotta Granholm

MUSC has also made a point of ensuring its medical students are comfortable dealing with age-related conditions by connecting them with “senior mentors,” people 65 and older who live in Harleston Senior Village in downtown Charleston.

“Even if it’s only one person they meet with, they develop a relationship and become less fearful of treating older adults,” Granholm said. Some of those mentors will speak on a panel at Aging Research Day about their personal experiences.

Regardless of background, everyone at the Aging Research Day conference will get a new perspective on an old challenge: trying to help as many people as possible live long, healthy lives. Bazan calls that “successful aging.”

[Lotta Granholm, Ph.D.](#), director of the Center on Aging, said Bazan’s zest for life reminds people that their field attracts some remarkable people. “We’re trying to show a career in aging can be very interesting,” Granholm said.

That’s important, because as both she and Bazan pointed out, the Baby Boom generation is aging rapidly. It includes more than 75 million men and women in the U.S. born from 1946 to 1964. MUSC and its Center on Aging, created in 1987, are working to keep up with that demand. Granholm said that over the last 15 years, MUSC has hired more than 40 faculty members specializing in stroke, Alzheimer’s disease, movement disorders and geriatrics.



Ryan Labadens

"Of Mind and Music" producer Brent Caballero, left, director Richie Adams and Dr. Nicolas Bazan talk at a screening of the movie.

“Successful aging is when sight, for example, and cognition remain untouched up to 90 years of age or beyond,” he said. “Unsuccessful means when sight, cognition and the other senses start failing earlier. We’ve developed models and experimental approaches to try to pin down what’s going on very early on under those conditions, before the failure happens.”

Bazan, who directs the Neuroscience Center of Excellence at the Louisiana State University Health School of Medicine, has zeroed in on the [retina of the eye and the hippocampus](#) area of the brain as key areas to study. “We’ve linked changes there with aging actively.”

He said aging calls for a multidisciplinary approach, including people specializing in biochemistry, pathology and patient care, so it’s important to bring them together at events such as Aging Research Day.

Like the neuroscientist in his novel and movie, Bazan is fascinated by what he and other researchers are discovering about aging. For example, as the singer he wrote about shows with her remarkable recall of old songs, music can temporarily work wonders in people with dementia.

“We know nowadays, even in advanced cases of Alzheimer’s, [music restores part of cognition in patients](#). It’s a very important area in neuroscience called connectomics. This refers to connections between function in related areas in the brain,” Bazan said.

He hopes his talk at MUSC will not only entertain but also show how research can be translated into treatment. “That’s the immediate challenge: how all of our findings can help patients. I believe there are ways now that I didn’t see 5 or 10 years ago. It’s happened in a short time.”