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Daytime drama star Victoria Rowell tackles opioid addiction in new film, debuting in New Orleans

BY SUE STRACHAN | sstrachan@theadvocate.com JAN 11, 2019 - 6:40 PM



Victoria Rowell and Nikki Austen Smith in a scene from "Jacqueline and Jilly," a series about opioid addiction. It will be at AMC Elmwood Palace Theater starting Jan. 11 for one week. Rowell, in addition to starring, is the series' executive director, director and co-writer. Smith portrays Jilly, who becomes addicted to opioids after a horseriding accident.

Photo: Derek White/Courtesy PV Public Relations

For actress Victoria Rowell, it was time to address the opioid crisis.

“I can’t be in this industry for more than 30 years and not do something dramatically around this,” she said. “I personally know people who have lost their children. Both went into surgery, became addicted, then overdosed. They were from good families.”

Rowell is a familiar face on TV and film: she was part of the cast of “The Young and The Restless” and “Diagnosis Murder,” and was in feature films such as “Dumb and Dumber” and “Eve Bayou,” which was filmed in Louisiana.

The best-selling author of “The Women Who Raised Me,” about her upbringing in foster care and the women who influenced her life, Rowell also writes for TV and movies, including the UMC daytime drama “The Rich and The Ruthless,” streaming on BET. She's executive director and director of that series.

It is the denial of addiction – particularly in affluent families – that is explored in her newest effort, “Jacqueline and Jilly.” Currently a six-part series on the UMC Channel via Amazon Prime Video, “Jacqueline and Jilly” has been edited into a feature-length movie in limited

release. Produced by Rowell's company, Days Ferry Productions, it opened locally Jan. 11 for a week at AMC Elmwood Theater.

Rowell also stars in the movie, and is its executive director, director and co-writer. The severity of the opioid epidemic is something she is passionate about sharing. "You don't have to be an addict to care," said Rowell in a phone interview.

With "Jacqueline and Jilly," Rowell's crusade is crystal clear from the opening scene. Over scenes of a rolling sea, with a young girl singing, statistics from the epidemic flash on the screen: "116 people a day die from opioid-related drug overdose," – HHS.gov; "Nearly 80 per cent of heroin users misused prescription opioids prior to heroin use." – HHS.gov, and "Because of the forces of stigma, the population is reluctant to seek care." – Prof. Dan Ciccarone, University of California, San Francisco.

The story focuses on Jilly Mitchell, portrayed by Nikki Austen Smith, who is struggling with college and her addiction to painkillers, prescribed after a fall from a horse. She has also started to use heroin. Her wealthy parents –

Jacqueline, portrayed by Rowell, and Magnus, portrayed by Richard Brooks — are having marital problems and seem to treat Jilly as an accessory to their family.

The movie progresses quickly after Jilly bursts into her parents' dinner party, embarrassing them with an outburst. Leaving in a rage, she gets into a car accident. In the hospital, the doctor recommends Jilly enter drug rehab right away.

Both parents recoil in denial. Her father quickly realizes, though, that something needs to be done, and Jilly is sent to rehab.

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Joining the cast is Daphne Maxwell Reid, whom many remember from “Frank’s Place,” the 1987-88 TV show set in a New Orleans restaurant. As Jacqueline's mother, she's in denial about Jilly's addiction, more concerned about keeping the family's reputation intact.

The movie follows the family's journey through drug addiction, and shows how the past informs the present — a topic Rowell is familiar with.

Placed into foster care as a child, “I saw the health care disparity,” she said, between those who were poor and rich.

"Most people think drug addiction is typically aligned with the poor, particularly ethnicity, and it's not true," she said. “It is found across all economic spectrums.”

The movie is dedicated to Caitlyn Weems, who died in Virginia Beach, Va., from a heroin overdose in 2013 at age 21. Like Jilly, Weems' addiction came after a sports injury and she was prescribed painkillers.

With this film, Rowell hopes to reach more people about the epidemic. She chose New Orleans as one of five locations nationwide for

the movie to open. (The others are Birmingham, Alabama; Cherry Hill, N.J.; Baltimore and Philadelphia.)

“I love the city,” said Rowell. “It is extremely diverse, and I wanted to present it here.”

New Orleans is special to Rowell. Even though she is originally from Maine and is currently based in Los Angeles, she has a strong family connection to New Orleans through the Marsalis family: Jasper Marsalis is her son with Wynton Marsalis, with whom she had a long-term relationship. “I dearly love the Marsalis family,” said Rowell, who has come to the city to visit the family and for other occasions, such as the Jazz and Heritage Festival.

Never one to rest, Rowell is working on a D.C.-set Yuletide film, “Twas the Christmas Before Chaos,” and “Pride and Prejudice: Atlanta,” a church-based, all-black remake of the Jane Austen classic. But the opioid crisis is never far from her thoughts.

Get help and information such as 800.662.HELP, a 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for

individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

Click here for more information about the movie.

Corrections:

Daphne Maxwell Reid was misidentified as Daphne Mitchell Reid.

Cherry Hill, N.J. was misidentified as Cherry Hills, N.J.

We regret the errors.

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