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Health Care

Filmmaker brings into focus life of pioneering transgender, women's rights neuroscientist Ben Barres




Ben Barres' lab at Stanford University found that a protein called C1q accumulates at nerve junctions in the brain and could lead to Huntington's disease, Alzheimer's and more.



By [Ron Leuty](#) – Senior Reporter, San Francisco Business Times

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After dozens of interviews with Ben Barres' family, colleagues, teachers and friends, watching scores of hours of old clips and scanning hundreds of newspaper and journal clippings, Pamela Green can sense Barres all around her.

As she works on the script for her film about the life of Barres – a transgender man, tireless advocate for women's and LGBTQ rights, and renowned [Stanford University](#) neuroscientist and biotech entrepreneur – Green can feel Barres' sigh, his anger and his laughter at various points of his life. Those reactions have transformed Green herself as she tries to raise more funds to push her feature film, called "Ask the Question," toward production.

"I'm not the same person who walked into this," Green said.

The filmmaker's \$65,000 Kickstarter campaign two years ago ended up raising more than \$75,000. But there are more images that must be licensed, stories that need to leap paywalls and a script that must come together before Green can bring Barres' life to the screen.

When Barres [died](#) from pancreatic cancer at 63 in late 2017, he left multiple legacies. His scientific work on cells known as glia and the "complement cascade" – a function of the immune system that can prime synapses in the brain for destruction – led to advances in Huntington's disease and Alzheimer's disease.

A company he co-founded, Brisbane's Annexion Inc. (Nasdaq: ANNX), last month produced positive topline results in a [late-stage clinical trial](#) of a drug aimed at Guillain-Barré syndrome, a potentially paralyzing condition in which the immune system goes awry and attacks the peripheral nerves.

Among the people Green has interviewed are Nancy Hopkins, a molecular biologist and Barres colleague at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who wrote the forward to

Barres' posthumously published "The Autobiography of a Transgender Scientist."

"Ben called Nancy a hero," Green said. "They were inseparable."

It was at MIT that Barres – then known as Barbara – markedly felt the sting of discrimination. Barres saw more acutely how people treated female scientists after he transitioned in his 40s to a man.

"The movie is about data, incredible science and this person who loved science and would do anything in the community," Green said. "No matter what, he would have your back."

What Barres didn't do is spend a lot of time saving pieces of his life. That's turned Green into a detective, unraveling the scientist's thoughts, feelings and groundbreaking work through a web of friends and colleagues, including former Stanford President Marc Tessier-Lavigne (now CEO of AI-based drug-development startup Xaira Therapeutics) and transgender rights activist, author and educator Jamison Green, whose writings inspired Barres' transition.

Green, a two-time Emmy-nominated film director and producer, had completed a critically lauded film about turn-of-the-20th-century [filmmaker Alice Guy-Blaché](#) when she first learned about Barres. Now Green simply needs more money to bring Barres' story to the screen.

"I'm exhausted every day because the tears keep flowing when I interview people, but these little pieces are giving me a story," Green said. "I want people to laugh, cry, get angry and walk out differently from how they walked in."

"I want them to feel Ben's kindness and empathy and be more educated about women in science and what went on with his transitioning and his revolutionary science," she said. "It's sad, but he has left an amazing world behind him."

T H E L I S T

Largest Bay Area Colleges and Universities

Total enrollment

Rank	Prior Rank	School
1	1	University of California, Berkeley
2	2	City College of San Francisco
3	3	San Francisco State University

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