

His mustache campaign is a growing undertaking

Mustaches might just grow on you. Anyway, Jay Della Valle hopes so. Upper-lip hair has become a bit of an obsession for this 26-year-old East Rutherford resident, whose own mustache is a thing of beauty and a joy forever.

Now he's on a campaign to bring the late, lamented 'stache back to its rightful place in the male fashion universe (under-30 division). And his 70-minute documentary, "The Glorious Mustache Challenge," is his secret weapon.

Yes, you read right: "glorious mustache." And so, Della Valle is not out to reform spelling along with facial hair.

"When I put 'glorious' next to 'mustache,' it looked wrong," he says. "You cannot spell 'glorious' with an 'o' and 'mustache' without an 'o.'"

You could, of course, spell 'mustache' with an 'o,' but ... oh, never mind. "We thought this way it would attract more attention," Della Valle says.

"The Glorious Mustache Challenge" is more or less in the documentary tradi-

tion of "Super Size Me" — a record of a social engineering experiment. Della Valle challenges some 35 young guys, ranging from professionals in their late 20s to one enterprising high school student, to grow a mustache for a month.

Not a beard. Not a goatee. Not a Vandyke. We're talking the real, honest-to-goodness Tom Selleck article.

Nothing to it, right? Guess again.

"Getting guys to grow a mustache is not an easy thing," he says.

In America, mustaches have been a hair "don't" since their last great flowering in the 1970s, the golden era of Burt Reynolds. Older guys — the ones who came of age in the 1970s — sometimes still have graying mustaches left over from their youth, but a younger guy who affects a furr on his upper lip is liable to be viewed as a poser, a loser, a sleazebag.

"The mustache took a turn," he says. "Suddenly, people weren't taking the mustache seriously anymore. Even the mustache icons, like the Brawny guy on the paper towel, changed to a clean-cut guy."



CHRIS FEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jay Della Valle, center, and his mustachioed supporters.

When it comes to lip hair, Della Valle is a Johnny-come-lately. He's had his own 'stache only since October 2004.

For most of his adult life (he was born in Hackensack and raised in Wayne), he affected the kind of facial scruff favored by rock musicians. For three years he has fronted his own North Jersey-based band, Della Valle.

It was when he was trying to get his filmmaking career off the ground that his mustache fixation began.

"It began with me noticing that no guys under 30 today wear mustaches," he says. "When I came up with the idea, it was really a joke. Let's all grow mustaches. We'll call the band Mustache.

They were like, no way."

Conceived first as a fictional feature, "Glorious Mustache" eventually evolved into a documentary, shot on video for about \$10,000. The film had its New York premiere Thursday; Della Valle now has his eye out for a distributor and festival opportunities.

Meanwhile, he's beating the drum with such events as a mustache march and rally in Union Square ("What do we want?" "Mustaches!" "When do we want them?" "Now!") and a "Mustache Soiree" in the Village in which lip hair was an entrance requirement (women were given stick-ons).

"It's been a challenge," Della Valle says. "I remember telling the idea of the film to my mom at one point, and she was laughing. I said, 'Look at me. I am going to bring the mustache back and people are going to know I did it.' And she said, 'Well, OK.' It was like I was saying I was gonna be president."

In his effort to "rock the 'stache," Della Valle was faced with more than the challenge of finding 35 guinea pigs willing to risk ostracism for the sake of his movie. He had to put the entire history of the mustache in context.

While the mustache has a glorious — er, glorious — history that goes back to ancient Egypt and China, its real heyday

was the first half of the 20th century: starting with the invention of the safety razor in the early 1900s and continuing through such mustache icons as Teddy Roosevelt, Charlie Chaplin, Clark Gable and midcareer Beattles.

Three dictators of the 20th century — Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Saddam Hussein — were mustache men. But then so was Albert Einstein.

"Some of the best men, and some of the most devious men, have sported mustaches," Della Valle says. "Some of the sexiest men, and some of the most repulsive men, have had mustaches."

That attractive-repulsive paradox is central to the mustache mystique, Della Valle believes.

Particularly with women. Many of the ladies interviewed in his film make comments like "not attractive," "no mustache," and "I will not date a guy wearing a mustache." But Della Valle is enough of a chauvinist to believe that when women say "no mustache" they really mean yes.

"Most people will tell you you look better without it," Della Valle says. "But it gets noticed, it's a conversation piece."



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