



MSU News Service

## MSU film graduate wins Student Emmy for film about a little mother with a big impact

July 14, 2008 -- Carol Schmidt, MSU News Service

Katy Garton Magruder has made an award-winning film about her mother's death, but what makes the film unforgettable is what it says about life.

"Little Mom Full of Color," a film about the final year in the life of the tiny but tenacious Susan Garton, earned Magruder a coveted second place in the College Television Awards, commonly known as the Student Emmys. The recent graduate of Montana State University's [Science and Natural History Filmmaking program](#) received the award at ceremonies held this spring in Los Angeles, just two weeks before her wedding.

The Missoula-based Magruder is the third MSU student to win a Student Emmy, presented by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Other MSU winners were Praveen Singh who won first place in the Student Emmys in 2004 for his film "Indian Leopards: The Killing Fields." Paul Hillman won a second place in documentary filmmaking in 2005 for "Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal."

As wonderful as receiving the Emmy was for Magruder, it was also bittersweet, for it came without her mentor, inspiration and subject of the 60-minute documentary.

"(Mom) would have done anything to be there," Magruder said of the black-tie gala. "She loved to dress up and go dancing."

Garton, a tiny woman with outsized spunk and joie de vivre, was an accomplished artist who loved laughing, skiing, the bargain table at the Anthropologie store ("I came into the world stylish and I'll go out stylish), and, above all, her family. Her tenacity resonates throughout the film, even in the days shortly before she died in September 2006 at the age of 51 from cardiac arrest, and not the metastasized melanoma nor the kidney failure for which she was receiving treatment.

"Does it hurt, or do you get used to it?" Magruder asks her mother in the film as she was prepped for dialysis. Garton had been treated for kidney failure for seven years and underwent dialysis treatments several times a week for many of those years. Garton looks the camera in the eye. "You never get used to it," she says, her eyes filling.



*Katy Garton Magruder, second from left, picked up her College Television Award, commonly known as the Student Emmy, at ceremonies in Los Angeles this spring. Magruder, a recent graduate of MSU's Science and Natural History Filmmaking program, won second place in the documentary category for a loving and unflinching film about her mother's last year. Photo courtesy of Katy Magruder.*

Magruder said her mother felt her illness made her an outcast. Garton exhibits anger and hurt at the medical establishment that largely ignored her during her illness despite the efforts of Magruder's sister, Rachel, who is a surgeon. It is only Garton's personal physician, Dr. Peter Weir of Salt Lake City, who lovingly but directly discusses her illness, her fears and her certain death. In fact Garton, who was a registered nurse for decades and longed to go to medical school, learns of the severity of her cancer through a fax. Even her oncologist will not return her calls.

"I am invisible," Garton wrote in her journal. "I am no one."

It is that kind of honesty that makes the film effective, according to Ronald Tobias, MSU film professor and Magruder's adviser.

"The film works as a personal story but it works even better as an exploration about what it to be chronically ill in America," Tobias said. "Anyone watching this film could be prepared for what could happen in their own family."

Tobias said it would have been easy for Magruder to make a film that was simply a personal testament about her mother's final days, and viewers would have been satisfied. However, because Magruder was making a film that would also serve as her thesis for her Masters of Fine Arts degree in Science and Natural History Filmmaking, the film needed to be more than that. Magruder also has solid science credentials -- a physicist, she was the topic of a New York Times piece about "Invisible Yellowstone," a 30-minute film about the microscopic life living in Yellowstone's thermal features. That film won two silver Telly awards.

"I said if you can make a film that anyone could watch and learn something about what it means to be ill or dying in this country, then you have accomplished your goal," Tobias said. "And that's what she did."

Tobias, who calls the film "brilliant," praises Magruder for not hiding behind the camera as she could have, for being fully present with her vision, her thoughts, her love and pain.

Magruder credits her parents with the support that has made her and her siblings successful. Magruder's father was an H-VAC specialist and her mother a nurse who raised their family in several western towns, ending up in Salt Lake City. Both valued education, but Magruder said they did not push or nag their children to succeed.

"We didn't have a lot of money, we always rented, but my parents always made sure we lived in the district with the best schools," she recalled. Her parents did have their priorities. "We would go without presents for birthdays and holidays so we could all have season ski passes."

She said her parents trusted their children. "I recall my mom and I going up the lift on a powder day on Sunday and she begged me to skip school on Monday to ski with her. I'd be the one to say 'I can't, Mom. I have a calculus test.'"

To this day Magruder's passions run varied and deep. She is an avid backcountry skier and outdoorswoman who has been passionate about the stars since she can remember. She earned a degree in physics from The Colorado College, but "couldn't bear to sit by a desk writing code for a telescope all day." A photography hobbyist, she fell into filmmaking while she and her sister were climbing in Peru. Filmmaking appealed to her as a way for her to make an impact.

In the summer of 2002, Magruder moved to Missoula and heard about MSU's Science and Natural History Filmmaking program. She lived in Bozeman for eight months and then moved back to Missoula, making the occasional journey to MSU to meet with Tobias. In November 2007 she completed her thesis work and received her MFA. She now runs Sprout Films <http://www.sproutfilms.net>, a video production studio in Missoula where she works on documentary films in addition to an array of digital media projects.

Magruder is currently working on distribution of "Little Mom Full of Color". In the meantime, excerpts can be found on the film's Web site <http://www.littlemomfullofcolor.com/bio.html>

For more stories about MSU's Science and Natural History Filmmaking program, go to:

<http://www.montana.edu/cpa/news/nwview.php?article=5288>

<http://www.montana.edu/cpa/news/nwview.php?article=6032>

<http://www.montana.edu/cpa/news/nwview.php?article=4071>

<http://www.montana.edu/cpa/news/nwview.php?article=4901>

<http://www.montana.edu/cpa/news/nwview.php?article=2220>

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