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Always Hope: The Matthew Jessen Story

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Always Hope: The Matthew Jessen Story

By
Christopher Jessen

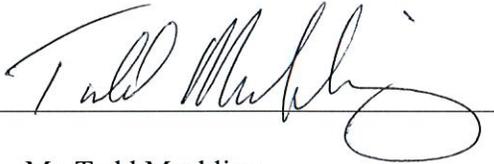
A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

Department of Contemporary Media and Journalism
The University of South Dakota
May 2013

The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed
to examine the thesis of Christopher Jessen
find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michelle Van Maanen", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Michelle Van Maanen
Assistant Professor, Chair of Contemporary Media and Journalism
Director of the Committee

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Todd Mechling", written over a horizontal line.

Mr. Todd Mechling
Instructor of Contemporary Media and Journalism

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Miglena Sternadori", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Miglena Sternadori
Assistant Professor of Contemporary Media and Journalism

ABSTRACT

Always Hope: The Matthew Jessen Story

Christopher Jessen

Director: Dr. Michelle Van Maanen, Ed.D.

Everyone is at risk of a brain injury every day. The effects of a brain injury can range from the minimal to the debilitating. Matthew Jessen is a brain injury survivor and my brother. His story is one of struggles and triumph as he overcame an injury that could have killed him. This documentary examines the impact brain injuries have through Matthew's story. It describes Matthew's journey through his initial seizures, his stay at the Mayo hospital and the brain injury facility On With Life, and his return home and to school. The documentary also shows wide range of effects a brain injury can have on a person. The artist statement included in this document describes how I filmed and produced this documentary, along with my personal journey through making it.

KEYWORDS: Brain Injury, Documentary, Hope, Matthew Jessen

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all those that helped me in developing and producing this labor of love. First of all, I would like to thank all of those that agreed to be interviewed for this documentary. Without you, this entire project would not have been possible. I would especially like to thank my parents and my brother for agreeing to let me tell their story. I would also like to thank each member of my thesis committee, Michelle Van Maanen, Miglena Sternadori, and Todd Mechling. Each of you offered great advice which helped make this a better film. I would like to add further thanks to Dr. Van Maanen for her guidance and support throughout this entire endeavor. Thank you for all the many emails and words of support and counsel. I would also like to acknowledge the Contemporary Media and Journalism department for awarding me a generous grant in order to help purchase a second camera which vastly improved the quality of this film, and for loaning me lighting and audio equipment for the production phase in May. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Trevor Zuck for his help filming Matthew's graduation, calmly answering my frantic texts for help, and pointers through post-production. Finally I would like to thank Honors Director Scott Breuninger for his patience and assistance through producing this creative thesis. Again, to all of you, and to any others I have forgotten, thank you. None of this could have been possible without you.

DEDICATION

This documentary is dedicated to all those living with a brain injury, the individuals who dedicate their lives to helping brain injury survivors, to my amazing parents without whom I would not have made it through, and to Matthew: my brother, my friend, my hero.

ARTIST STATEMENT

This thesis is very near to my heart, because at its core it is about what is most important to me: my family. The idea for this project came to me as I was walking through the green space just outside the Old Main building on the University of South Dakota's campus. I was racking my brain, trying to decide what I was going to do for my thesis. I had put off thinking about it for about two years, but the deadline for my proposal was looming. Every day the pit in my stomach grew larger as I kept coming up empty on ideas. Then I got a call from my mother Patti. I forget now the specific details of the call, but it had something to do with my brother Matthew. She mentioned how he was practicing walking for graduation, and that's when it hit me. It had been so obvious the entire time. All of my passions were right there: family, story telling, and an opportunity to further my filming skills. After speaking with the honors program director Scott Breuninger about whether this sort of creative thesis would be acceptable, I gave my brother Matthew a call. I wasn't going to go ahead with the project unless I had his blessing. He immediately said yes. Then, he asked whether he'd have to be on camera.

My undergraduate thesis project is a documentary on the impact of brain injuries on a person's life, told through the story of my brother Matthew. When Matthew was 10 years old, he suddenly developed epilepsy. He was at home after a basketball game when he decided to go take a nap while my parents Jim and Patti were in shopping in town about 15 minutes from home. It was only Matthew, the family dog, and me. I was about ready to walk outside to play with the dog when I heard a thunderous crash from the other room. I wondered what had my destructive little brother broken now. When I

opened the door, I found him lying on the floor, seizing uncontrollably. I had never seen anyone in so much pain before. I immediately called my parents. Everything seemed to happen as though it was slow motion and fast forwarded at the same time. Before I knew it, my mom was attempting CPR, while my dad was frantically calling the paramedics for help. I blinked, and we were at the hospital, where the doctors promised us that Matthew would be okay. They were wrong. The seizures would end up leaving life-lasting damages. He needed to be placed into a medically induced coma because the doctors could not stop the seizing. Matthew eventually journeyed from our Des Moines hospital to the Mayo hospital in Rochester. There, he continued to fight for his life as the doctors there tried to diagnose him and find the right medicine. Parts of Matthew's brain had atrophied because of the seizures, which caused his current brain injury. After months at Mayo, Matthew was deemed stable enough to be transferred to a brain injury rehabilitation center called On With Life, located in Ankeny, Iowa, not far from our home in Altoona. There, he partook in various rehabilitation therapies, including physical, recreational, and speech. During this time, Matthew was still technically in a coma. He didn't speak, ate through a feeding tube, and just stared with big, seemingly empty brown eyes.

Matthew would eventually begin to eat regular foods, and even started speak again. He still had to deal with his seizures, which would strike unexpectedly at random times. Matthew was eventually able to return home from On With Life. The house had been renovated to accommodate Matthew, who was confined to a wheelchair. Matthew slowly reentered school, and the fall after he returned home, he began junior high as a

member of the special education program. Matthew's education has been mostly uninterrupted since then, and there has been no major seizure activity for a while.

My brother has a severe brain injury. His brain injury affects his mental capabilities, causing him to have a very short memory span and difficulty thinking critically. Matthew's brain injury also affects him physically. He uses a wheelchair to get around, though he is able to use a walker with assistance to get around when needed. He usually needs assistance with going to the restroom, getting dressed, getting in and out of bed, and transferring in and out of his chair. Matthew also suffers some emotional disabilities as a result of his brain injury, such as a very quick temper. He can sometimes be violent and has a hard time stopping once his anger gets going. Matthew can also be immature and unable to recognize certain social cues.

Yet, Matthew is also a very successful young man. Easily his greatest accomplishment is that he is still alive. There were many times the doctors, and even my parents, were sure he was going to die. Yet Matthew kept defying the odds. He's always been ornery like that. Matthew has also had successes in school. Despite staying in the special education department from junior high school on, Matthew was able to integrate into some non-special education classes. Matthew was also able to join the high school track team. In fact, Matthew has been extremely successful at track and field. He was a two-time state champion in the wheelchair shot put and a state champion in the wheelchair 100-meter race. Matthew also maintains a wide network of friends, who deeply care about him.

For me, this documentary was a way to take Matthew's inspirational story from the community level and elevate it to something more. The timing of my thesis could not be more perfect, either. Matthew graduated last May, not long after I was going to start my thesis. I was only one of the few people privy to the fact that Matthew planned to use his walker and the help of two of his best friends to walk across the stage to get his diploma. This was something he had been planning for a while. He would later tell me that he did it to show people that the bad things that happen in our lives do not define us nor should they keep us from living. So his graduation was going to be the centerpiece of the documentary. I was going to tell his story leading up to graduation and also use it to inform the audience about brain injuries in general. It is a condition that could happen to literally anyone. One source for the documentary told me something that I think really sums brain injury up: "We are surrounded by it on a daily basis; we also are at risk for it on a daily basis." I have been loosely involved in brain injury awareness since high school. Given the increase of soldiers coming home with brain injuries and the number of athletes receiving damaging concussions, I knew this was an important subject to tackle. But outside of brain injuries, Matthew's story does exactly what he wanted his walk across the stage to symbolize: It shows us how precious life is and how we can overcome the obstacles in our life.

The first step I took was to form a committee. Michelle Van Maanen is my thesis director. As the chair of the Contemporary Media and Journalism department and well versed in broadcast journalism, Dr. Van Mannen was the perfect choice. I also chose Miglena Sternadori of the CMJ department for her excellent skills in story telling and

Todd Mechling, also of the CMJ department, for his expertise in video production. My committee provided me a group of great instructors with a wealth of knowledge between them that would be extremely helpful in going forward with my documentary.

From there, I needed to establish my sources for my documentary. I knew that both of my parents and my brother had agreed to take part, but I needed to gather sources that would add more depth to the documentary, both in terms of Matthew's story and brain injuries. I was able to secure interview times with Dave Anders, a therapy manager at On With Life and Matthew's former speech therapist; Tania Bentley, Matthew's case manager for the Iowa Brain Injury Waiver; Steve Olsen, Matthew's physical therapist; and Nate Smith, Matthew's track coach. Each was able to provide a different perspective to the story and help move the narrative along. In the end, I was able to use all but Mr. Smith's interview in the final product.

I began filming the documentary in May of 2012 after I returned to Altoona at the end of the semester. During May, I used my own equipment and some loaned to me by the CMJ department, including lighting and audio gear. The first of the interviews went well. In hindsight, I now know of some ways I could have improved them: improved lightening techniques, better white balancing, and better interview locations. I also made some mistakes with crossing the visual axis. I used two cameras to get a direct angle and a wider, side angle to cut between in post production. In some of these interviews I placed the camera on the wrong side of the interviewee, which is something I did not realize until post production. Even though some of the visual aspects of the interviews could have been better, the substance of the interviews was solid. I was able to solicit

great soundbites and emotional shots from nearly all the sources. I also gathered a lot of good description of brain injuries and the side effects they cause. In all, I gathered about seven hours worth of interviews to comb through in the post-production stage.

For the most part, the interviews were not difficult, except for the ones that involved my family. It was difficult not to be a son and stop the interview when my parents became very emotional. It was hard to not help my brother more through the interview when he became confused. I needed to remind myself that I had to portray this to the best of my ability. Interrupting the interview at the height of emotion would only damage the overall product. I had to make sure to inform them that I was going to let all emotions play out, and in the end, that really added a lot to the documentary.

A documentary needs more than just interviews, though. I had to gather what is called “b-roll,” video of action that can be laid over interviews. The most obvious b-roll I would be gathering was Matthew’s graduation, but I needed more than that, a lot more. It is a good rule of thumb to remember that you can never have more than enough b-roll. I filmed multiple events and activities in Matthew’s life, including his state track meet, a day at his school, and a physical therapy session. I made sure to gather b-roll of all the people I interviewed, trying to capture them either at work and or interacting with Matthew. As I said, you can never have more than enough b-roll. I had to go back and film more b-roll multiple times after May. Even after my defense, I have a list of b-roll shots to gather. The more b-roll a documentary has, the more visually active it is. During this time, I also gathered statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and the Brain Injury Alliance of Iowa about brain injuries on a national and state level.

Then it was time for the big day: Matthew's graduation. For this event, I asked my friend Trevor Zuck, a professional in the video industry, to help me film using my second camera. He sat farther away from the stage at an angle so that he could get wide and side shots of Matthew walking across the stage. I took a spot in the stands directly in front of where Matthew would be walking. I was extremely nervous that day, not because I was filming, but also on behalf of Matthew. I was so afraid that he would fall. Not long into the ceremony did I realize that I would need to move from the spot in which I had planted myself. There was far too much vibration in the stands to allow for steady video. I moved down to the floor not long before Matthew took the stage, and, boy, did he not disappoint. He didn't trip, he hardly even stumbled as he made his way across to get his diploma. The best thing about it was not Matthew walking; it was the fact that the entire arena gave him a standing ovation, and it started with his classmates. It was really touching to see how much the students in his class cared about him and how invested they were in his story. I had to control my tears as I filmed. The filming itself was difficult. To get a good look at Matthew through the lens, I needed to hoist my steady cam up into the air over people's heads. The heavy weights on the steady cam certainly made my arms sore quickly. I also needed to deal with the people, who seemed to ignore the fact that I was filming my little brother. I had multiple people walk in front of my camera, including a photographer who looked directly at me, made eye contact, then pushed his way in front of me to take photos. It was lucky that I planned a second camera man to cut between footage.

After that I had the vast majority of my video ready to go, saved my external hard drive and backed up on a second hard drive. I had a summer internship between when I started the documentary and the start of my senior year. Though I brought my external hard drive and planned to do lots of post-production work over the summer, the long hours and excitement of living in Washington, D.C., essentially killed that plan. I was able to lay some interview tracks, but, in all honesty, I did not get much work done on it. When I returned to school, I cracked down and got to work. Over the next few months, I spent probably at least between 60 and 70 hours in post production. Some of that time was dedicated to watching each interview multiple times to find the perfect soundbites. Other times, I was faced with deciding how I wanted to present the narrative. I had three different plans of how to work the story, I chose one of them and put together about 30 minutes worth of the documentary before I decided to scrap that script and write an entirely new one. Then, I made nearly that entire version of the documentary before reworking it again and altering the placement of some aspects of the story. The documentary itself went through at least three or four revisions before I even showed one minute of it to someone else. Post-production seems like it wouldn't take that long to someone who has never shot video before. But this stage probably takes longer than any other part of filming, especially if you want to do it right. Editing just a few minutes of video can take hours. Editing 53 minutes worth of a documentary took months. There is a lot that goes into post-production: watching and re-watching hour-long interviews, editing clips so the sound and video is just right, color correcting everything, playing with sound levels, finding the right right b-roll for the right segments, and much, much more.

I feel for those that do this on a much larger, feature film scale. It can be tedious, stressful work. But if you do it right, it can be very rewarding.

For me, though, one of the toughest parts of the post-production process was not the actual editing. Rather, it was reliving the interviews. When I had sat down and filmed my parents and my brother, I had spent the interview listening closely, but also trying to think of my next follow up question. Sitting down and really listening and absorbing what they were saying during the post-production phase was much harder. I was forced to relive the most difficult period in my life. I also learned many aspects of my brother's story that even I did not know. I was only 13, going on 14, when it happened. I was kept in the dark about a lot of it, especially Matthew's daily struggles and even some of his life-threatening incidents. I knew things were bad, but hearing my parents talk about the specifics really brought it home. There were times in post-production when I needed to just stop and walk away because the work was making me depressed. I admit I cried a few times. Talking it out with my fiancée and my mother helped, but it was something I had to get through, which I think helped me deal with some of the issues that have weighed on me since it happened. It was both cathartic and therapeutic in a way. I never knew going into this thesis how much it would effect me.

This was my first attempt at a documentary. While in hindsight, there are things I wish I could change about how I did it, I believe it ended up being what I hoped it would. It is powerful, emotional, informational, and real. It is unforgiving in the reality it portrays. I did not hide the fact that Matthew has anger problems. I gave the emotional and the logical a voice. I created the best piece that I could with the skills that I had. I

am a better film maker because of this. While I do not imagine that I will find myself in Hollywood some day, I do love making films. It is a passion that I will carry through the rest of my life. When I started the thesis, I wanted to do something that would help not only other people, but also help me. I wanted to get better at something I love, and I think I accomplished that. But what is more important to me is that I hope that this documentary helps someone, somewhere, prevent a brain injury. Sometimes someone can be doing nothing wrong, like Matthew, and have something like a grand mal seizure. There are also plenty of people who have received brain injuries due to something they could have prevented: wearing a helmet, wearing a seatbelt, not texting while driving, making sure a ladder is steady, etc. As mentioned before, we all surrounded by brain injuries and at risk for them every day. If this documentary can save at least one person from a brain injury, then the year of my life dedicated to this will have been worth it.

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