

Bright Ideas < By Sam Whiting >



MAREN GRAINGER-MONSEN ON HOW FILM CAN WAKE PEOPLE UP TO REALITIES IN MEDICINE

It figures that Dr. Maren Grainger-Monsen would become a documentarian. Her parents, Joseph and Elaine Monsen, have built one of the largest collections of photography in private hands. But their daughter put up a fight, first devoting herself to the Japanese tea ceremony and then going to medical school before she started making films. Grainger-Monsen, 44, lives in Portola Valley.

"I WAS A RESIDENT in emergency medicine at Stanford hospital. In the emergency department I found that the staff would all lead resuscitations and we'd all say, 'I never want that done to myself.' I thought, 'I need to make a film about that.' The public doesn't understand what a resuscitation is like.

THERE IS THIS perception that you can just get your heart started again and everything is fine, so why would you die if you could survive? The issue is the consequences of being resuscitated and having your heart come back somewhat, but not your brain, and months and

months in the hospital, or just a prolonged death.

I REALIZED THAT it was a much bigger issue. It was all about our own fear of death. I met this amazing hospice social worker, Jim Brigham, and went with him on home visits to patients that were dying.

WHEN THERE IS no further treatment, the doctors usually become scarce. It is hard for them to know how to interact at that point. They don't feel like they have anything left to offer. Doctors are all about cure, but you can treat the symptoms. You can also help them know what's ahead and walk them through that.

THE FILM IS CALLED "The Vanishing Line" and was on PBS on their 'P.O.V.' series. There is one scene where we are at this man's house and I thought he was going to die on camera. I incorporated that into the film, this whole struggle that I was having about 'how can I stand here

and let this person die. I'm an ER doctor.' But then I'd say, 'No. Today I'm a filmmaker. I'm not a doctor.'

I'M JUST FINISHING this big project on health care disparities in the U.S. There are four short films I made for medical education, called 'Worlds Apart,' that are being used in 40 percent of the medical schools in the country. There is also a feature film called 'Hold Your Breath.'

THE LIGHTBULB: **Medical school is this relentless series of lectures eight hours a day and then studying all night. The best part, by far, is when they bring in patients to tell their stories. I realized if I could make a film that would share these patients' stories, it would have tremendous impact.**

It's about an Afghan refugee family who are Muslim. That broadcast on PBS last spring. I've been going to screenings around the country. I just got back from the Mayo Clinic where I was amazed that it sold out, 450 seats.

WHAT I LEARNED in making 'Hold Your Breath,' is that as a physician I always used to approach rela-

tionships with patients as if I had trust, unless something bad happened. I assumed they trusted me, and one of the biggest things I learned is not to make that assumption, especially when there is a cultural barrier. You have to really earn that trust.

I WOULD LOVE to make a film about the tea ceremony. The issue in making documentary films though, is finding a topic that I'm willing to dedicate five years to and also something that's fundable. I don't know how fundable the tea ceremony would be.

I'VE GONE BACK and forth between clinical practice and making films. There are probably no two other jobs where you can ask whatever you want and people will answer you. I run the program in bioethics in film at the Stanford Center for Biomedical Ethics. I don't know of any other ethics center that has a filmmaker in residence. It's very strange. My hobby became my career, I guess."

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