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Movie review: 'The Vanishing Line' is a powerful look at death

By John Hartl
Seattle Times Movie Reviewer

"The Vanishing Line," documentary by Maren Monsen, presented as part of the "P.O.V." television series, 10 p.m. Tuesday, on KCTS-TV.

The most inspiring installment to date in this season's "P.O.V." series, "The Vanishing Line," was created by a physician and filmmaker, Maren Monsen, who grew up in Seattle and attended medical school at the University of Washington.

A graduate of Stanford University and the London International Film School, she won a local Emmy for her first movie, "Where the Highway Ends: Rural Healthcare in Crisis." She followed that with a medical training film, "Grave Words," which uses comedy to help doctors talk about death.

"The Vanishing Line" is a more serious attempt to come to terms with mortality in a society that often seems allergic to the subject. Monsen is particularly concerned with the notion that a prolonged life is necessarily worthwhile.

"We're deluding ourselves to think technology can fix everything," she says. "A good death is very important." As an example of death horrifically denied, she visits a boy who

drowned, "died" for 40 minutes and was revived. He was so severely brain damaged that he's been a vegetable for five years.

"He's doing pretty good," says the boy's father as he attaches a feeding device through his stomach. The father's devotion and super-human dedication are apparent, but what we see is a horror show: an immobile, corpse-like creature that stares open-mouthed at the ceiling.

The film then takes a ghoulish detour through the history of people who were buried alive in their coffins, complete with the image of "Dracula's" star, Bela Lugosi, staring from the inside of his coffin.

Monsen admits that medical school gave her "no idea of how to deal with death," which is regarded as failure by doctors who are tied to the idea that life must be extended at any cost. She felt that she had become one of them.

"So what was I really doing?" she asks. "Prolonging life or prolonging death?" She admits that she lacks personal experience ("I've never had to deal with the death of anyone I love") and finds herself remembering stories about death that fascinated her as a child.

Monsen went back to a Greek myth about the three fates: one spinning the thread of life, another measuring its length and a third fate cutting the thread. Her

exploration of the subject changed the way she practiced medicine.

Eventually the focus of "The Vanishing Line" shifts to Jim Brigham, a hospice social worker who specializes in "grief work" and does have experience with the death of someone he loved.

"Jim made it look so simple and straightforward," says Monsen. "He seemed at ease with death." In addition to the terminally ill clients he visits on a regular basis, he spent years coping with the slow death of Cay, his wife of 24 years, who succumbed to multiple sclerosis in 1986.

To Brigham, "the act of dying, of completing one's life, does not have to be a terrible and horrible thing." Indeed, he feels that he and his wife shared a profound experience as she lay dying. At one point, he remembers, "There was no me."

Monsen accompanies these final scenes with imagery that reinforces Brigham's mental state: a bee beating desperately at a window in a hospital waiting room, followed by abstract shots of water, stones and wheat fields. Like the film itself, these last scenes begin in frustration and end with a calming sense of release.

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