

Seeking the sea

Fim depicts the fulfillment of cancer victim's last request

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Maire Kent always knew the rare type of cancer she had in her heart would kill her. While her doctors sought to buy her time through an extensive sequence of chemotherapy, this often left her dazed and confused. But not about one thing – her last wish.

Before and after her death in 2013, Maire (pronounced Mary) became the subject of an unusual documentary called “Maire’s Journey,” one of the films at this year’s Golden Door International Film Festival in Jersey City.

Maire learned at age 23 that she had a life-ending cancer, called Sarcoma. This is a rare cancer that can begin in the connective tissues anywhere in the body, but the absolute worse place is in the heart. The only cure is to completely remove it – an impossibility when in the heart.

From the start, Maire accepted the fact that her disease could not likely be cured. But she continued treatment hoping to control the cancer and extend her life – for a short while, at least.

Her doctor, Monika Leja, one of the nation’s very few cardio oncologists, along with Dr. Rashmi Chugh, had made it their mission to try to find a way to shrink the tumor so Maire could be a possible candidate for a highly specialized heart surgery procedure.

But one night when she and filmmaker Keith Famie were returning from one of those experimental treatments, Maire turned to Famie told him she wanted her ashes spread in the sea.

As a young girl, she had read the book “Paddle to the Sea,” about a Native American who had made the journey to the sea by canoe. She wanted her ashes to go to the ocean and be spread there.

Famie told her he had a blind friend who built urns, and said this friend might be able to build a boat. She was pleased. The coffin maker, George Wurtzel, agreed to make a boat that would transport Maire’s remains and photos of others who lost the battle to cancer.

Thus began a journey that took her ashes across half a continent and in and out of the lives of scores of people who had not expected to take part in this epic journey, each step documented as a tribute to Maire’s remarkable life.

An award-winning documentary film maker already, Famie had been working on a film series about death and kept waking up with chest pains. He called a doctor who said e should go to an emergency room. He said no, and his doctor recommended a local heart specialist, who, after tests, found nothing wrong. But when the doctor heard about Famie’s film project, he suggested he meet Maire.

She was facing a tough road. Over the months, Famie got to know her, and realized that this person

needed to have her story told, and not as part of another series.

Maire had family, but they were not in a position to help. So he did, and part of their adventure together included visits to various places such as an after life conference, and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. She even got to see a concert by her favorite performer, Kenny Chesney.

The long strange trip to the sea

Maire died on Sept. 27, 2013. The boat was launched in July 2014.

“We had no idea how Marie was going to get to the ocean,” Famie said.

The six week journey involved planes, boats, trains, cars, even the side car of a motorcycle driven by a veteran from Vietnam

“If no one helped her, she would still be floating,” he said

Maire’s ashes journeyed 1400 miles from Lake Michigan to Jersey City where she eventually had her wish fulfilled.

“The whole story is about faith on so many levels,” Famie said. “Not so much in a religious sense, but a spiritual sense. How people came to help, managing to pull it off.”

In some ways the journey retraced what American myth has referred to as the northwest passage, going along rivers and canals leading eventually leading to New York Harbor, helped by a paddle boat operator on the Erie Canal and by a series of events that led to her train ride south.

Setting off from Lake Michigan in a boat especially constructed for this trip by a blind boat builder, Maire’s journey became a large puzzle which perfect strangers helped to complete, in order that she would be able to achieve her dying wish. Each person called on to act responded when need presented itself.

The three-foot boat, which resembles a miniature rowboat or sail boat, was decorated with images of other cancer victims and set into the current, mostly propelled by wind and current.

“We always envisioned this journey to include assorted means of transportation, including boat, plane and train,” Famie said.

As it turned out, that’s exactly what transpired. Although no one made firm plans, just put it out there in the universe hoping it would happen, people stepped up and did their part

Before they left Michigan, Famie figured they would have to travel to the Hudson River to get to New York City. The filmmaker and crew followed the boat with her ashes, using a boat with camera crew, drones and other equipment. But they did not interfere with the story, letting events unfold.

“This story is everybody’s story,” he said. “People stepped in. There always were a lot of questions as how this would happen”

In places when things seemed like they would stall, people stepped up, such as one of two men who helped find train travel for another part.



At one point, when Maire's boat became stranded on a reef, a young man dove into the water and helped dislodge it.

Famie was in a restaurant overlooking the river and several women started paying attention to the scene being shot outside on the river. The boat later got stuck again nearer the restaurant. One of the women gasped, pointing to one of the names painted on the side of the boat. At the beginning of the trip, the boat builder had painted the names of cancer victims on the hull. One of the names was the same as the woman in the restaurant husband. While it was not the same person, it was among the strange coincidences of the trip.

"Things like this happened along the trip," Famie said.

Maire's ashes were moved into different vehicles at different parts of the trip, so that she arrived eventually in Jersey City by train, rather than water.

Eventually, they got help getting down to the river, and came to Jersey City Harbor near Liberty State Park. The problem was how to get her ashes out into the harbor. He said he didn't want to row them out in a row boat, but wanted to do it in style.

"We have come so far and gotten so close, but it seemed so far away. We had no way to get her out," Famie said.

The commander of the yacht club helped arrange to meet a yacht owner who brought the ashes out, sailing into the sunset.

"Many of the people along this trip found comfort because it reflected some issue in their own lives," he said, "a loved one who has passed on."

The trip for him provided closure since he had become very close with Maire during their brief time together.

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