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SALT IN MY SOUL about CF Warrior Mallory Smith will make you cry and love it

by Quendrith Johnson, Los Angeles Correspondent



When the documentary SALT IN MY SOUL directed by Will Battersby drops Jan. 21, in the first round of screenings, the life of Cystic Fibrosis Warrior Mallory Smith will be shared and her journey with this condition bared. Diagnosed at age 3, and given heartbreaking news of a predicted short life at age 9, Mallory put punctuation on her own death sentence by journaling about it. She also did yoga, became a surfer, writer, podcaster, even a Stanford University graduate.

If you can't control the span of your life, the documentary shows how she aimed to control the shape of her life, the pattern of happy normalcy willed into reality.

"I never wanted to hear people say she 'was sick'," her mother Diane Shader Smith says in our interview, "she had a condition."

Mallory died at age 25 on Nov. 15, 2017, and her book "Salt in My Soul: An Unfinished Life" was posthumously published by Random House in 2019. But how this book happened is a story in itself, which is reflected in the documentary.

"I feel people with CF are privy to secrets it takes most people a lifetime to understand," is just one of Mallory's insights that were captured since age 15, when she recorded hours of audio and video footage during her illness in secret.

Director Will Battersby makes sure to emphasize what a "huge privilege it is to tell Mallory's story," when he doubles with Diane on the phone. "I didn't want 96 talking heads," he adds. Because the source material is "all Mallory," probably enough for a limited series to follow he notes.

There's young Mallory who will say "65 roses," as with most children who can't yet pronounce the name of their diagnosis, followed by a volleyball-playing teen doing teen girl things except for the intubation. By the time SALT IN MY SOUL introduces the accomplished young woman editing a niche book on environmentally sustainable gardening, you know she will be gone soon and that this ailing optimistic 6 ft. tall warrior will leave an indelible mark on the viewer.

Her last boyfriend Jack is shown, eyes down, piecing together her absence after her death. Her father Mark, an attorney who actually researched lung harvesting to the point of exhaustion, is shown with mother Diane and brother Micah in a last ditch effort to bring life saving microbes, phages, to the rescue. By now Mallory's blood gases have been suppressed passed survivability, although 2500 pages of hidden writing will greet her family on her passing, as a living chronicle to the life they just saw pass out of existence in that last hospital stay.

Such is the draw of this self-documented source material, the unflinching access into a tragically shortened life allowed by "a very private person" who at the core of her being knows "how lucky we are to be alive."

The inability to transport salt across membranes, a genetic anomaly, that underpins Cystic Fibrosis and creates clogged mucus, is muted for Mallory who was happiest at the beach, worth her salt and with the real salt in her soul.

"It's a million times worse than the film, infinitely worse than what we show" to live with this condition, Will and Diane aver, when asked about the hard moments, the hospital crushes, tough sequences of sputum and suffering.

Diane is caught on camera saying "I don't do sad" in SALT IN MY SOUL, as it was her way of staying upbeat during Mallory's life. But in a healing candid moment she shares a nuance of her motto in closing. "I said 'I don't do sad,' but I meant 'I don't do sad in public.' This is all part of my grief journey."

"The film will be shown to Congress," Will Battersby adds, "there's a whole series of special screenings."