



SALT IN MY SOUL

Calhoun Kersten | January 14, 2022

Salt in My Soul tells the remarkable story of Mallory Smith, whose memoirs by the same name were published posthumously to offer equal parts solace and sobering reality as she details her life with cystic fibrosis. Mallory Smith passed in 2017, but she is survived by a passionate and committed family, led in part by mother Diane Shader-Smith and father Mark Smith, as well as brother Micah. With the vision of director Will Battersby, *Salt in My Soul* comes to big screens January 21 before arriving on VOD a few days later on January 25.

Salt in My Soul is one of those rare glimpses of promise that pains you to watch, partly because you know of its “unhappy” ending. Make no mistake, the documentary does cover Mallory Smith’s 2017 passing. It would be difficult to tell the life story of a cystic fibrosis advocate without addressing her inevitable decline and loss of life, but the quotes surrounding unhappy are very much earned. This is part of the charm of *Salt in My Soul*; it never shies away from the gut wrenching and heartbreaking reality of the disease. Instead, there’s a raw practicality to *Salt in My Soul*.

Early on in the documentary, Mark recounts a time when Mallory was roughly 9 and struggling with her treatments, not physically but with the iron will and determination most parents would surely recognize in their own kids. He explains how she was adamant that she was done with treatments, and she didn't want to do them anymore. This pleading led to bargaining and the inevitable question of "this isn't fair, why do I have to do this?" Without dramatics or much presentation at all, Mark explains how he promptly told her if she did not continue her treatments, she would get sick and die. Battersby does a wonderful job of framing this, not an ounce of judgment, but squarely planted in the reality they live in. *Salt in My Soul* makes space for Mallory's optimism while also shedding a light on the stark reality of her condition.



In her own words, Mallory describes it as "a balance between striving for more and being happy with what you've got." This is perhaps the most significant contribution *Salt in My Soul* offers its audience; the central message of empowerment and taking care of your body and living with the limitations life has imposed upon each and every one of us. Mallory's life certainly had more in store for her in her 25 years than most people are tasked with their entire lives, a sentiment echoed by those closest to her, but what this documentary makes room for is, simply put, the messiness of the human experience. Over the course of its roughly 95-minute run time, Battersby and Diane Shader-Smith sit with the gamut of emotional experiences- the fear, the hope, the uncertainty, the determination, and all the various shades of gray that lie between. While it is certainly hopeful, more in regards to the future of cystic fibrosis treatment since Mallory's own life was cut short, it does not shy away from the doubt and dread. This fully realized and dimensional portrait of living and dying with chronic illness is difficult at times, but it offers up all of its heart and soul to the audience.

Salt In My Soul is confident in its narrative, which echoes the Mallory Smith that director Will Battersby shows us, but with this being Battersby's directorial debut, the only shortcoming of the documentary is its sometimes amateurish presentation. These moments are most glaring in the cracks of the finished product, such as lingering too long on a documentary subject before cutting away or somewhat stilted transitions. None of these are distracting enough to take away from the central thesis, but rather, with such a strong foundation in this doc debut, it's exhilarating to watch Battersby's work with the utmost confidence that it will only improve as he finetunes his craft.

Salt In My Soul's remarkable true story, under the watchful stewardship of director Will Battersby and Mallory's mother and frequent documentary subject Diane Shader-Smith, tenderly breaks your heart while offering hope for a better future and an acknowledgement of a family's profound loss. It serves as a tribute to the spirit and determination of Mallory Smith, an undoubtedly heroic figure for those whose lives have been touched by chronic illness. This documentary makes her presence and life philosophy unavoidable and borderline intoxicating. Even knowing Mallory has since passed, it's difficult to watch without feeling hopeful that things will somehow turn out differently, but Mallory, Diane, and all the others featured in *Salt in My Soul* are keenly aware that this story has one ending, the ending we all have waiting for us, and treats it with the dignity and respect those living with cystic fibrosis so richly deserve.