

THE

MOVIE STATE



INTERVIEWS

SALT IN MY SOUL: INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR WILL BATTERSBY

🕒 JANUARY 20, 2022 👤 BEN SEARS 💬 LEAVE A COMMENT

I recently spoke with director Will Battersby, director of *Salt In My Soul*, a documentary about Mallory Smith and her battle with cystic fibrosis, and the irrevocable impact she had on everyone she met.

We discuss Will's involvement in the project, the difficulties of telling Mallory's story in a concise and compelling manner, and raising awareness for cystic fibrosis. Our conversation has been edited for clarity.

Ben Sears: How did you come into this project and get involved in telling Mallory's story?

Will Battersby: One of our producers, Richard Abate, sent me the book at the end of 2019, and he was involved in selling the book to Random House. Mallory's mother, Diane [Shader Smith], found her way to him and he always thought it would make a great documentary. He sent it to me, and I agreed immediately. I read the book in one sitting. I knew it was filled with interesting characters and huge themes.



BS: One of the things I'm always fascinated by with documentaries is the editing process. How difficult was it to sift through so many hours of footage, from Mallory's family's home videos to Mallory's recordings, plus all the interviews you did?

WB: It's hard, and that's why you hire brilliant editors. Lucky is the wrong word, but we were fortunate to have the time that the pandemic afforded us. Otherwise we would have been more distracted by other projects and developments and various things but April Merl, who edited the film, and I, were able to really just kind of live with this and dig into it. I think it's definitely challenging when you have that much material, but it's what makes the film work or not. And that was one of the reasons I knew we could make a film. When I talked to Diane early on, she wanted to know what kind of film I wanted to make before she gave us the rights to do it. I always had the instinct to make it a kind of coming-of-age story from Mallory's perspective and then as soon as I started to hear how much audio there was, I thought, 'okay, great, I know I've got my narrator'. I really wanted it to be a first-person feeling from Mallory's perspective and then we made some amazing discoveries along the way. There's the sit-down interview with Mallory, which we didn't conduct – it was done by a choreographer in California who did a dance based on Mallory's life – and nobody had watched it; Mallory's family had said it was too painful to watch. We watched it and thought 'it's gold' because you have her on camera talking about her experiences, and then we discovered very late in the process that they had used two cameras. They hadn't even thought about the value of that second camera. They said "oh, it's handheld, it's shaky" and I thought it was even better. You have some of the stuff with the dog by Mallory's side, and we were able to cut between shots in that interview. It's challenging and takes time to craft it and, as always, we had a 3.5 hour cut, and I thought we were done, and the film's 96 minutes, so it took a lot of time to then work it down into what we ended up with.

BS: You mention the two cameras that Mallory used, and you mirror that as well with some of your interviews, which you don't always see with those segments in documentaries.

WB: I've always been kind of adamant about two cameras for interviews. It makes an editor's job easier because you can cover cuts and you can cut to the same camera or overlap audio. But I think you also want to be closer on people because, unless you're just doing a purely informational piece – which this isn't; there's so much emotion and you want to make sure you're capturing it and you want to make sure you're close on people's faces. So it was actually dumb luck that the interview with Mallory used two cameras. We didn't know that before we started shooting, so we were thrilled that that resonated. I don't know if you noticed, but the interview with Diane in the living room is almost the exact same spot where the choreographer had interviewed Mallory. So that shot has a kind of strange resonance between the two of them. They're different types of cameras so it feels different, but there was some really fortuitous and amazing stuff like that. Plus the footage of her surgery, we discovered that by accident.

BS: I liked the way you had done that surgery segment, where you just use the raw footage with no narration or music over it. It drives down the power of that moment.

WB: It's interesting you identify that because we tried several times to put voices over that, whether it was Mallory or Mark or Diane, and you just have to be in that moment. Of course, the family doesn't know what's going to happen there, so you almost need to just be in that moment and have the audience have that similar experience.

BS: You had mentioned this feeling like a kind of first-person documentary, and I agree with that stance since you have so much of Mallory's narration and her perspective. But because she was such an open and outgoing person, the interviews with her friends and family almost feel like an extension of her.

WB: That was certainly by design. If you notice, the lower-thirds that we used to identify them are the same as what Mallory used to identify them. Uncle Danny is named as Uncle Danny, et cetera. It wasn't just to be cute, it was to put you in the middle of Mallory's experience and then also their experience. What I realized in doing my interviews with them is that we weren't in the present, as it were. We weren't there during Mallory's life. We were meeting these people in grief, so that was a really important space to remain in with those interviews. So calling Danny 'Danny Smith' or 'Danny Shader' would knock you out slightly.

BS: Not to spoil anything, but you have the moments where everyone is reading from the book, and it really makes it feel like they're almost surrogate speakers for Mallory.

WB: Yes, Mallory's voice leaves the film at a certain point, and so what's left is the book and other people reading the book. It's other people reading her words, and being affected by her words, and definitely the people involved. Hopefully that gets passed along to the viewer as well.

BS: One aspect I noticed is that there's kind of a similar outlook that both Mallory and her mother have in trying to put a positive spin on every situation. From your perspective, would you think that Mallory inherited that from her mother, or do you think Mallory had it all along and it rubbed off on Diane?

WB: I think it's very much a Diane quality that Mallory inherited. Diane is an extraordinary community builder. She's one of those people that, within 5 minutes of meeting somebody, she wants to know what they need, how they are, and she wants to help. I think what I find moving about both of them is that they're willing for that to be a two-way street. And obviously Mallory kept some of her mental health stuff secret because she didn't want to burden people, but I think one of the messages that I really want to come out of this film is that it's OK to share. It's OK to share what you're going through, good and bad and ugly, with other people. Because it's only through that empathy and that community that we survive.

BS: What do you hope that the film does for cystic fibrosis awareness and people's understanding of it, and what it does to a person?

WB: I hope that a lot of people simply learn what it is. It's something we all hear about, but until we take the time to learn something, you



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don't really know what it is. It also helps that 100% of the profits from the film are going back into research, specifically phage and anti-microbial resistance research, and my hope is that people are moved and inspired by it. I hope that we can do a little bit of good in the world. We're a small documentary, we're not gonna change the world, but I think Mallory's story actually might. And that's the book, the film, and Diane gives talks all around the world. That treatment that Mallory received at the end of her life is now being studied because of her case by universities and institutions across the world.