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She Drives Me Crazy

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CRAZY MOTHER and a drunk daddy. The words have the makings of a bad country-western song, or a tale of a family on the skids. But it's Margie Thorpe's life, available on video.

Margie, a junior majoring in interdisciplinary studies at USF St. Petersburg, co-produced and co-starred in, as it were, a documentary titled *Alma*. The 90-minute film, named after her mother, won the Hamptons International Film Festival and was included in the Whitney Museum's prestigious Biennial 2000. *Alma* just finished a successful run in artsy Greenwich Village, was reviewed in *The New York Times* and praised by *The Village Voice*. The *St. Petersburg Times* named *Alma* the best documentary of 2000.

Not bad for a child born of dysfunction who grew up with conflicted emotions about her parents.

"As a kid, I didn't think my mom was mentally ill," Margie says. "I just thought, God, my mom is a pain."

Alma, a schizophrenic, tended to scream out the window all night. Sometimes that blended into the general hubbub of their working-class Atlanta neighborhood. When it didn't, Alma would spin it another way.

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"She would say, 'I was fine until your daddy had me tortured in 1965,'" Margie recounts in her best Alma voice.

Alma was involuntarily committed to Milledgeville, an understaffed, state-run mental hospital in Georgia. Margie's father, James, called the police after Alma smashed her fist through a window and acted "real weird." The police put her in jail and then moved her to Milledgeville where she received shock treatments.

"They electrocuted me eight times and each time I was laid out dead on a stretcher!" she howls in the film. "It was a concentration camp!"

Margie was 3 years old at the time.

Now 38, Margie got the idea for the documentary after writing cathartic stories about her mom. "I thought they were funny, but when I read them back, they were dark."

And one-sided. She wanted to give voice to her mother and she wanted to do it right. That meant hiring the best people she could afford to document, compassionately, Alma being Alma.

There's Alma wearing her big, black binocular glasses, giving her head a forceful nod, a la "I Dream of Jeannie," to make the traffic light change to green. Sometimes it does.

Alma talking to the warlocks. Alma wearing a tiara atop her flowing white hair to flaunt her status as "queen."

"I live in a real fantasy. The Bible says call things as you want them, not as they are. And that's all I do." Pause. "They call that hallucinating."

There's Alma telling Margie about her affair with Elvis. "Elvis Presley and I used to meet in the cosmic dreamworld and have sexual intercourse. That's most likely who your father is."

The camera pans Elvis memorabilia intermingling with the religious icons that fill Alma's house. Religion figures large in her life and often tangles up her thoughts. Her Alabama upbringing stressed keeping her soul in good standing. Her semester of Bible study in college cemented that belief.

But Margie remembers her father sitting in the living room drinking beer and her mother touching herself in bed or cleaning herself in the bathroom all day. Alma retorts, "The Bible says you have to smell good in God's nostrils." She wears a fig from the grocery store in her hair, and traces it to the book of Isaiah.

"He has took me, for 35 years, to the ugly parlor," Alma says calmly. She doesn't mind mentioning that James "wanted to disfigure my face. He knocked one side of my face higher than the other. He injured his fist and told people at work he hit a tree."
drives me crazy

A schizophrenic mother and abusive father made Margie Thorpe’s childhood a nightmare. But she triumphs over her troubled past with the acclaimed documentary *Alma*, which bears her mother’s name.
Margie got used to the beatings, but wonders if part of her mother’s craziness stemmed from the concussions she got every Friday night.

The couple also had an offbeat love life. Alma made Margie take photos of her parents naked and sexually aroused, and the still photos show up in the documentary. When Margie asks her mother why, she says “I thought it was best you see things firsthand and learn it in the home instead of in a dark corner somewhere.”

“You made my home a dark corner,” Margie responds, leaving the room.

Margie was about 7 when Alma made her nurse from her breasts. There’s no explanation for it. When Alma was 7, she was raped by her uncle in a cotton field. To this day, she believes it was she who seduced him.

Margie escaped when she 17. She went to New York for a while, then returned to Atlanta to front a country swing band called Miss Margie and the Tall Boys. She became a party girl with a litany of boyfriends. Eventually, she matured and had lots of therapy.

She believed that everyone she was related to were comical perverts. “The more I looked at them and me, the better I looked and felt,” she says.

She and Ruth Leitman, a rock-and-roll photographer who had one documentary under her belt, began filming in 1993. They shot 130 hours of film, and the documentary took four-and-a-half years to complete. Wonder of wonders, James stopped drinking during that time and has been dry ever since. “It’s only now since Daddy’s been sober that Mom seems so extreme in the mix,” Margie says.

But what began as a film about her mother turned into a film about their relationship. Their likenesses to each other comes out. Both like attention from men. Both have a flair for the dramatic. Both won Miss Best Posture awards.

And both had a peculiar way of playing with dolls. When Alma was little, she would collect any discarded dolls she found and pretend that she killed her husband and cut her babies. Margie, on the other hand, didn’t want to be a little mommy. She took all her baby dolls and dismembered them. “I kept the heads in one drawer and all the

Margie’s Story

TALK ABOUT A TURN-AROUND. Rising from the pit of poverty, a mentally ill and sexually abusive mother and a violent father, Margie Thorpe has prevailed.

Bright enough intellectually but tarnished from a tough childhood, Margie dropped out of high school in the 10th grade. Sure, she earned her GED a few years later, but her prospects for college lacked promise.

Now 38, she’s a junior majoring in interdisciplinary studies at USF St. Petersburg, and her grade point average is sky high. She’s made her debut with Alma, a documentary about her complex relationship with her mother. The acclaimed film has circulated independent film festivals, won a spot in the recent Whitney Museum’s Biennial and been shown around the country for successful short runs.

Margie is trying to be the first person in her family to get a college degree, and she traveled through rough emotional terrain to get where she is. Therapy relieved much of the anger and resentment she felt toward her parents, and ripped the bandage off her shame so it could heal.

She began working on Alma in her 30s and it took every ounce of perseverance she had to finish it. Making an independent film is never easy, and on top of those responsibilities she bartended to make ends meet. It took four years.

Sure, she wanted to quit—many times, in fact. But her impetus was to help others.

“Alma was a journey through black tunnels of my life in hopes of coming out the other side,” Margie says. “These dark subjects make a lot of people feel like they are ‘all alone.’ I made the film in hopes that someone would see it and realize that he or she is not alone.”

Shortly after completing the film, her mother’s health plummeted. Due to diabetes, Alma’s leg was so infected that only amputation would save her life. Margie made the decision to have the leg removed, and then became her mother’s full-time caregiver for two months. She lost her job in the process.

The aftermath of the crisis brought her face-to-face with herself. Canvassing her soul to determine what it was she really wanted in life, she tinkered with the idea of going back to school. But could she cut it academically? Could she swing it financially?
Seeking Relief for Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia, the psychiatric disorder that caused Alma to believe she could magically make traffic lights change, speak to warlocks and know Elvis in the biblical sense, afflicts about one out of 100 Americans.

But the cost of the disease comprises a huge percentage of the nation's healthcare expenditures. There is no cure for schizophrenia, and medications control only the most severe symptoms—the voices and delusions of persecution. Until recently, the drugs have done nothing to ease the inability to interact with people and lack of motivation. In some cases, the prescribed medications have even exacerbated those problems. As a result, most schizophrenics require long-term care.

“Our treatments have not been as effective as we’d like them to be. People haven’t been able to work or take care of themselves,” says Dr. Pauline Powers, a USF psychiatrist who is researching a new medication for the control of schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia usually emerges in adolescence or the early 20s as a result of chemical imbalances in the brain. The condition appears to be hereditary. Some research has shown that exposure to viral infection during the second trimester of the prenatal period impairs development of neurons in the brain and causes schizophrenia in adulthood.

“Making the diagnosis is not easy,” says Powers. “It’s obvious when people have the hallucinations and delusions. But a lot of other things can cause that. What distinguishes schizophrenia is the difficulty in dealing with people and a marked difficulty with carrying on with daily life.

“Many people with schizophrenia are very isolated. They stay in rooms by themselves. They can’t get out and socialize and tolerate the interaction that goes on between people.”

About 50 years ago, the first drugs to treat symptoms of schizophrenia were introduced. Thorazine and other similar medications control hallucinations and delusions, but they have terrible side effects.

Short-term, they cause dry mouth and over-sedation to a zombie-like state.

Because they block the production of the chemical dopamine in the brain, they may cause movement disorders similar to Parkinson’s disease. Over the long-term, the old antipsychotic drugs cause tardive dyskinesia, an irreversible condition that causes uncontrollable movement of the hands, feet, body or face. The risk of the movement disorder increases the longer the medications are taken.

“Since it’s all we had to treat these flamboyant hallucinations, people couldn’t be taken off the medication,” Powers says. “We couldn’t just stop the drug.”

But a new class of drugs, called atypical antipsychotics, has been shown to effectively treat all the symptoms of even resistant schizophrenia with fewer side effects. Rather than just blocking dopamine, these new generations of antipsychotics block multiple brain chemicals, such as serotonin and histamine.

Introduced about 15 years ago, Clozaril, Risperdal and other medications alleviate the hallucinations and bizarre behavior as well as the social withdrawal, apathy and lack of emotion.

“In the past, once a person became non-functional, they remained non-functional,” Powers says. “The exciting thing about these new drugs is that they reverse this course. And what’s just great is that the risk of movement disorders is significantly less.”

Still, these medications aren’t perfect. One can cause seizures and a low white-blood-cell count, and another causes a tremendous weight gain, often in excess of 30 pounds.

Researchers are still looking for improved treatments. Powers is monitoring patients in two studies of the experimental drug Arapiprazole. The first study compares a standard medication to Arapiprazole.

“Arapiprazole has been shown to be effective,” Powers says. “We’re hoping it will be as effective as the other without the weight gain.”

The second study is a placebo-controlled study of Arapiprazole for patients with schizophrenia who haven’t responded to other medications.

For information about enrolling in the studies, call (813) 974-2832.

By Janet Zink

Encouragement from friends and sheer gumption spurred her decision—after all, she’d made a film, and she’d survived every curve in life she’d been thrown. The main thing she wanted now was an education.

She enrolled in St. Petersburg Junior College, and her track record there “proved I am fully capable of succeeding in college.” Now at USF St. Petersburg, where she also minors in mass communications, she intends to follow up with a graduate degree in public affairs.

In the meantime, she will be the keynote speaker at an important mental health conference in Philadelphia this spring. Alma will be shown during the conference, fulfilling her goal of using the film as an educational tool.

By Deborah Kurelik