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When I Walk

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When I Walk

Abstract

This is a film review of *When I Walk* (2013) directed by Jason DaSilva.

Keywords

Disability, Faith, Love

When I Walk

Directed by Jason DaSilva

(Premiere Docs)



When I Walk is a moving, honest portrayal of one young filmmaker's grappling with a devastating diagnosis: Primary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis.

Jason DaSilva, a vibrant filmmaker in his mid twenties was on family vacation in St. Martin in 2006 when suddenly his strong young legs crumpled beneath him on the beach and he couldn't get up. This dramatic onset of MS was captured on home video and begins the film's realistic portrayal of one family's journey with MS. Life had dealt Jason a new story to tell, so he picked up the camera, turned it on himself, and began filming the slow, difficult decline of his body. Far from depressing, the film is ultimately a testament to the human spirit to live and create despite the obstacles. The incurable disease which quickly robs DaSilva of his ability to walk and threatens to steal his vision as well is cruel and heartbreaking; however, the uplifting and varied score and the subject's pluck ultimately offer up a story that inspires.

"The mystery of faith is always a surprise!" is one of the closing lines of the film. This optimistic proclamation captures his heart well and DaSilva, who was raised Roman Catholic, continues to have faith. While religion and spirituality are not central to the film, during the several-year long sequence of trying a variety of cures from vascular therapy to Indian healers, he does travel to the shrine of Lourdes in France. This pilgrimage does not bring the healing he ardently requests from Mary, but his devout grandmother attributes another miraculous answer to his prayers: the gift of Alice, who ultimately becomes his wife and helpmate.

"When all else fails, I have my mind and my Mom." Ultimately his mom is joined by Alice and these two women become important parts of the story. They are both funny, straight-shooters. As his disease progresses, Jason is steeped in despair. His mother, whom he refers to as "Miss Positivity" counsels him: "When you feel doubt, think of the people in Jakarta. You have only one life. We don't know if we will die tomorrow. Life is tough, you molly-coddled North American kid!" With her true-grit encouragement, DaSilva learns to get around in a scooter and begins his documentary. A smart, pretty young woman, Alice Cook, enters the story and brings the hope that new life and love usually do. The film does not sugarcoat the difficulties of being in a relationship with someone with disabilities, and at one point Alice escapes the stress with a vacation to clear her

head. Their love story raises many intriguing questions about the core of our connection to others.

When I Walk allows viewers to understand the disease from an insider's perspective, a view-from-a-scooter if you will. Public moments and therapies are interspersed with more reflective, realistic moments that border on theodicy. While there is no Job-like crying out to God scene, there are several allusions to perhaps the most devastating part of illness: the loneliness of a life circumscribed. DaSilva refers to this as “lack of awareness, social attitudes, and exclusionary design” situate people with disabilities on the periphery of their communities and society at large. This can result in a “civil death,” a torture that is often greater than disability itself. "It sucks," Jason muses, "There is a whole world out there, so much I missed out on." While his sardonic mother intones: "we are really alone in this world," the film argues we are not. Jason finds love and companionship despite the odds. Through his app, which is created by volunteers, he is connecting those with mobility issues with the larger community.

DaSilva's mind and heart are generative by nature and he branched out into other media in addition to film. He launched AXS Map: a crowd-sourced platform for mapping wheelchair accessibility of buildings and places and sharing that information across a network. It will launch in Canada as well soon. At its core, AXS Map is a tool for creating social inclusion for people with disabilities,

and bringing mobility freedom to this minority group which has been historically excluded. He also founded AXS Lab, a new nonprofit that's building a network of organizations and people to supercharge the movement for inclusion of people with disabilities. AXS Lab (www.axs.org) aims to engage audiences to playfully explore the disability experience using new media, films, and the power of story.

While *When I Walk* will be most appreciated by anyone who has been diagnosed with a life-altering disease or has disability issues, this documentary delivers on a broad human level as well. It raises questions we all grapple with: Why do bad things happen to good people? What role does faith play in maintaining hope? What is at the root of romantic love? Are we alone in this world? What do you need to create family?

—Jeanette Reedy Solano