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Visions du Reel (Switzerland), Seminci (Spain), New Filmmakers New York 2011, FIDOCs 2011 (Chile), DocsDf (Mexico) 2011, Atlantidoc (Uruguay) 2011, CNEX Documentary Film Fest (Taiwán) 2011, Honorable Mention Bayou Inspirational Film Festival 2011, Milano International Film Fest 2012, Docstown 2012

65 min 2010 - USA

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ABOUT THE FILM

Surviving Amina is a love story challenged by illness and death, an intimate diary on resilience and hope. It's a compelling lesson on life that explores how we construct meaning from events that defy our emotional understanding: the illness and loss of a child. New York and Italy set the backdrop for this provocative and engrossing portrait of a family of young artists through a three years period marked by the Leukemia diagnosis of their second child, baby Amina, and the aftermath of her death. Shot in a verité style in New York and Italy, this documentary doesn't follow the medical details; it focuses on the emotional journey of this Swiss-Italian couple as they try to cope with happiness and sorrow, love and contempt, illness and fear.

They have to look after a sick baby, whose nature is tremendously happy, while also taking care of their eldest child, who is equally buoyant and magnetic. In stark contrast the couple relationship turns dark, bitter and antagonistic as they deal with the ordeals of hospitals, work, debts, fears and daily challenges.

Surviving Amina is not only a chronicle of a dreadful disease; it's a realistic, sobering and yet incredibly inspiring chronology of love and resilience bounded on intimacy, truth and hope. Without ever judging and with immense sensibility it raises disturbing questions about how we confront the most extreme of circumstances.

SYNOPSIS

Surviving Amina is structured in a prologue, three acts and an epilogue. It's shot in a verité style and it uses Tommaso and Anne voices' as a guide. In the prologue there's Amina's birth and happy memories of how her parents fell in love in Todi (Italy) before moving to New York, where the first two acts take place.

Amina's leukemia serves as the backbone of a story that digs deep into the cracks that the illness is causing on Anne, Tommaso and their first son Francesco. The tone, pace and music makes the viewer a witness, avoiding taking sides. There are evocative images that will also serve as a guide through the first two acts: a Tommaso's art performance before the New York skyline leads through some key moments, including Amina's death.

The open spaces of the third act, which takes place in Todi, are in defying contrast with the indoors feeling of before. The couple breaks up but Italy means a new future, even on separate tracks. Francesco, their families and their outstanding positive attitude are the way to heal. Surviving Amina is a compelling lesson on life that serves as a powerful tool in which everybody could mirror.

The epilogue brings the viewer to Amina's grandmother, Nonna Amina, the person whose name inspired the baby's name, and whose existence reminds us that even when life hurts, it has to keep going.

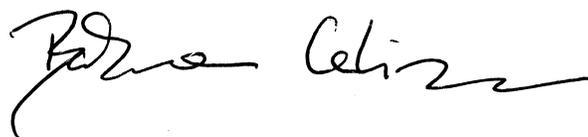
DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Little did I know that asking my friend Anne Lamuniere to shot her second child's birth would take me on a three-year journey that many people live only in their own flesh, silently without any witness. Four months after Amina's birth, the baby was rushed into the hospital. After her Leukemia diagnosis, Anne asked me to follow her family on camera. She wasn't looking for statistics or difficult medical procedures to show. She wanted me to be a witness of her daily routines and needs in the face of her daughter illness. She wanted to use her family's experience as a way to help others to find the courage to survive their fears.

That's how 'Surviving Amina' was born. But what it started as a movie that wanted to focus on the ordeals of living with cancer it took a much more intimate turn. As a close friend of Anne, I had unusual and unique access to her universe. While shooting, I realized that the camera became the mirror to which Anne could look at herself and try to make sense of the experience she was going through. It became a cathartic instrument for her, and the same happened to Tommaso, Amina's father, who was having an experience as hard as Anne's, but very different in its nature. Between them, a child, Francesco, fighting for his parents attention and as the backbone of all them, Amina, her sickness and her joyful nature.

When Amina passed away I wondered how they would survive after one of the hardest possible lost that any human can go thorough. That's why I decided to follow them to Italy and try to understand how humans learn to overcome loss and sorrow, how we make sense of life after the death of a loved one. They were brave enough to share their experience and feelings with me on camera. I am truly grateful because their story is empowering and inspiring not only for people dealing with illness and grief but for each one of us.

Barbara Celis,
Director.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barbara Celis', with a stylized, flowing script.

THE FILMMAKERS

BARBARA CELIS

DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, EDITOR, CINEMATOGRAPHER

She is a Spanish journalist and filmmaker who moved to London in October 2012. For the past 13 years she lived in New York where she worked as a regular contributor for the Spanish newspaper [El Pais](#). Her articles have been also featured in the [LA Weekly](#), Vogue, GQ, Cinemania, Rolling Stone, [ARS](#), La Repubblica, [Susy-Q](#), and [loncinema](#), among others. She specializes in arts and culture but through her 15 years career she has covered all kind of news, from the 9/11 attacks to [Hurricane Katrina](#) to Occupy Wall Street. She is a **first time director** but has extensive experience as a **producer**, having worked for The Family Film Productions in New York for over three years. She produced the feature film *The other shoe* and the award winning short *The Artist*, among others. She has a MA in Journalism by Universidad Autónoma de Madrid/El Pais and was recently awarded the [Premio de Periodismo Ciudad de Badajoz 2012](#), and the [V Paco Rabal Cultural Journalism Award 2011 \(Spain\)](#) for her blog [Crónicas Barbaras](#). She was also awarded the [USC Annenberg/Getty Arts Journalism Fellowship 2009](#). She has also worked for two years as a Communications Advisor for [Instituto Cervantes New York](#).

CARLOS NOAIN

ORIGINAL MUSIC COMPOSER

Carlos Noain is one of the leading musicians of his generation in Spain. He has an MA in Music by the The Juilliard School and a MA in Bass Clarinet by the Rotterdam Conservatorium. He has been member of many prestigious youth orchestras in Europe, including the Youth Orchestra of The Basque Country (EGO), the International Youth Orchestra of Oviedo (JOICO), the National Youth Orchestra of Holland (NJO) and the World Youth Orchestra of Jeunesses Musicales (JMWO). He is also a member of the indie rock band *Cedric Needs Us* and the experimental duo *Naica*. He lives and works in New York. *Surviving Amina* is his second documentary score.

CHEREE DILLON

EDITOR

Cheree Dillon most recently edited *Off and Running: An American Coming of Age Story*. It's a co-production of ITVS, in association with American Documentary/P.O.V. and The National Black Programming Consortium. This feature-length documentary premiered at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival and went to air on PBS's series, P.O.V. in 2010. Cheree began her career by editing commercials in Chicago. Since moving to New York, she has edited advocacy videos for The American Jewish World Service, Positive Planet, Passionists of Harlem, and V.O.W. (Voices of Women of Color with HIV/AIDS), She was Editor/Producer of *Song of Hannah*, distributed by The National Center for Jewish Film. Her other broadcast experience includes editing for NBC, PBS's Discovery Channel, HBO, HGTV, and NYC-TV. www.chereedillon.com

JULIEN BETORET

EDITOR

Julien Betoret is a seasoned editor from Barcelona with seven years of experience in the field. He works for Mamma Team Production Company, which specializes in advertising and music videos. He has worked as an assistant editor for Vodafone, Orange, Repsol, Skoda and the Justin Timberlake's music video *Sexy Back*, among others. He edited three short movies and a feature film. *Surviving Amina* it's the first documentary he edited.

MIKAEL SANDGREN

SOUND EDITOR

A native of Gothenburg, Sweden, Mikael Sandgren studied both Classical and Jazz music before launching into a successful career spanning numerous roles in the recording, film, and television industries. His body of work includes scores for independent films, documentaries, interactive games and more than 50 TV ads. He received a best music BAFTA nomination for the ethnic/orchestral score to Command & Conquer *Generals* (EA). In 2004 he received an *Addy* award for best music for the Budweiser *True Refreshment* commercial. In the pursuit of "aural visions" Mikael has done sound design for video artist Bill Viola since 2000. He identifies the projects as composition with non-tonal elements. In 1991 he began producing recording artists on his Guerilla Music label. He has worked with an array of artists and across styles with R&B greats such as George Benson, Carl Anderson, Bobby Lyle, Phil Ingram, Gerald Albright, and Phil Upchurch (with partner Gerald McCauley). Between 1999-2006 he was resident composer & creative director at Soundelux DMG, the largest independent post-production company in Hollywood.

www.mikaelsandgren.com

ALESSANDRA ZEKA

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

Alessandra is a documentary filmmaker with over 12 years experience behind the camera. She has developed a dynamic and intimate style on her work, frequently focusing in gender identity and the life of women. In 1998 she traveled to Albania to direct *Te Dÿrosh*, (To endure) film that portraits the life of 3 generations of women after the falling of the communist regime. Her most recent documentary *Harsh Beauty*, which she made while living in India for 18 months, tells the stories and hard situation of the eunuchs in India. She is the founder of Adrenaline Films, a company whose documentaries have been broadcasted on CNN International, Al Jazeera, TV3, HKN, ARTE, RAI2, among others. She is currently working on *A quiet inquisition*, a documentary that focus on the experience of women, doctors and activists in El Salvador and Nicaragua where the termination of pregnancy, even if it is in response to a result of rape, incest, or to save the woman's life, is a criminal offense that is actively prosecuted.

Q & A WITH DIRECTOR BARBARA CELIS

¿How was *Surviving Amina* born?

Sometimes you don't choose your destiny, destiny chooses you. Anne and Tommaso were my neighbors in Brooklyn and we became good friends. I believe it is quite amazing to bring a new human being to the world so before Anne gave birth to Amina I asked her permission to film it. Four months later Amina got sick and she was diagnosed with Leukemia (ALL). After the initial shock Anne thought it could be a good idea to make a documentary about her family to show it to other families who receive similar diagnosis. She was very optimistic about Amina's future and she thought she could give some hope to other parents in the same situation because at that stage, it seemed that Amina was going to survive. I started shooting and soon I realized that I had something very unique: an incredible access to the intimacy of this family, who allowed me into their world without ever hiding anything from me. We decided to set weekly encounters to follow up Amina's development and something unexpected happened: the camera became almost like a diary for Anne so I started to shift the focus from the illness and hospital procedures to the internal struggle that Anne was going through. The illness was affecting Anne and Tommaso relationship and the cracks were growing and growing.

After two years, when Amina suddenly died, I set aside the project. At the same time I wondered how they would survive their daughter's death. They had left New York, moved to Italy and broken up. So after a few months I decided to follow them and try to understand how they were coping with the loss of their daughter and their marriage. What I found were two very brave people struggling to get their dreams and their lives back, and I thought that maybe their story could be inspirational not just for people who go through a similar situation but for each one of us. Is it possible to overcome grief? That was the ultimate question.

¿What did you learn doing this movie?

I live in New York, a city that at times can make you feel very lonely, and where people mainly worry about themselves. Shooting this film allowed me to be close to my friends in a moment in which they really needed help. I found myself not only filming, but also helping them out with very essential things. Getting to know Amina was a blessing, as it was to get to know many of the incredible human beings that surrounded Anne and Tommaso. I have only words of admiration for this couple, their courage and their unbeatable love of life.

¿Where do you expect this movie to be shown?

I would love to have it released commercially but I also think that tv and educational distribution would be great. I just want the movie to be seen because it is a story that needs to be told.

¿How many hours did you film?

I had almost 70 hours of video. The movie is 65 min and there is also a shorter version for tv networks.

How the movie was funded?

With lots of patience and credit cards! I used my own resources. Friends and family chipped in and a few wonderful professionals volunteered to work for free or for almost nothing. They believed in the project and I am very grateful to all of them. It took six years to finish it. I also used the internet to raise money way before crowdfunding was on vogue. The last stage was financed with a pre-sale to the Swiss network TSR.

Tell me about the music, it seems you were very careful in choosing at what moments to play it or not to play it...

I knew I had the material to do either a 'crying' movie or a movie that 'makes your cry', and I was very afraid of the role that music could play there. I wanted to be sensitive and respectful without the obvious choice of being cheesy. Fortunately I found somebody very talented, Carlos Noain, and he understood exactly what I wanted. The whole score is his except for two songs, Currucucú Paloma, in the version of Franco Battiato, and Depois De, a Brazilian tune by Sandra Peres and Paulo Tati.

How does a Spanish journalist living in New York become a film director?

By chance, love and curiosity. When I moved to New York I interviewed a Spanish filmmaker, we fell in love and we spent four years together. Our Brooklyn loft was also a film studio so I had people shooting movies around me all the time. That's how I became curious about the whole process. I used to interview a lot of Hollywood directors and stars but being inside an independent film set was a completely different experience. I learnt production and I liked it a lot but I also tried the camera and I really enjoyed it. After a few years doing guerrilla filmmaking productions I went back to journalism but I was already hooked. I had already started to shoot short documentaries on my own, interviews, different things...

But even if you are a journalist your documentary is not focused in the kind of details and research that many people would expect from a reporter...

No, and I am very happy about that. I think I did a very intimate portrait of a family and I avoided many of the technicalities that you would expect from a more journalistic and medical story. That is why I love documentaries, people are wrong when they compare docs with tv reports. Documentaries allow you aesthetic and narrative freedoms that you can't have as a reporter. Subjectivity can play a major role and I like that.

FULL CREW AND THANK YOU CREDITS

Editors: **Julien Betoret, Cheree Dillon**
Original Music: **Carlos Noain**
Sound Designer/Sound Editor: **Mikael Sandgren**
Additional Photography: **Deborah Barkow, Rachel Gelbert, Scott Miller**
Colorist: **John Sawyer**
Associate Producer: **Alessandra Zeka**
Post Production Consultant: **Holen Khan**
Transcripts: **Guiomar Manso de Zuñiga**
Titles: **Martin Biehn**
Post Production Facilities: **Liberty Studios, Postbrooklyn**
Website: **Scott Poulin / [Arsenal Productions](#)**
Design and art: **[Zago](#)**
Fiscally Sponsored by **San Francisco Film Society**
Director, producer, cinematographer, editor: **Barbara Celis**
With the participation of Television Suisse Romande (TSR)

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