

THINGS TO DO

San Rafael duo's film celebrates artist Daubenspeck Cliff's 'life well lived'



By [MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL](#) and [VICKI LARSON](#) | Marin

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All Wilma Daubenspeck Cliff wanted to do was document her first solo art show so she could share it with family and friends.

Instead, the 95-year-old San Rafael resident is the subject of "Art is the Tree of Life," a 27-minute documentary film that will be featured at next week's 27th Wine Country Film Festival.

"I didn't realize I was asking for a documentary. I just wanted a few photos for my grandchildren; I thought, well let's show them what their grandmother did," she says with a laugh.

Although her story will be on the big screen for the second time in the past month, Daubenspeck Cliff scoffs at the idea that she's become somewhat of a celebrity.



“Celebrity is really for someone who’s accomplished a lot. I just did what I wanted to do,” she says.

It’s that humbleness that attracted Geoffrey Quinn and his wife, Christie Weicher, to befriend Daubenspeck Cliff in the first place.

It wasn’t until she revealed what drove her approach to life and her artistic style as Quinn began filming her that the couple realized they had the makings of an inspiring documentary.

The San Rafael couple had always wanted to work together on something, but with two demanding careers — Quinn is a primary care doctor in San Francisco and Weicher is an award-winning freelance TV journalist — they never seemed to find the time.

Daubenspeck Cliff’s story literally fell into their lap.

The couple first met Daubenspeck Cliff at church about a decade or so ago. They didn’t know much about her, her art or her life story. It was a casual friendship that grew when she asked Quinn, an avid amateur photographer, to take some portraits of her daughters.

Three years ago “she came to me one day and said, ‘I have this little thing that I’m doing and I am just wondering if you will film it,’” he says.

So Quinn bought an inexpensive video camera and accompanied her to her “little thing.”

It became apparent that it wasn’t a little art show at all, but a major exhibition of her work at Dominican University, where she had been taking classes.

“It’s typical of Wilma that she would underplay herself, that you would think that she was a nice person who did a little painting,” Quinn says. “Then you realize that she’s a brilliant, brilliant artist who is very talented and is greatly respected.”

As she calmly told the story of her creative process, she revealed how the sudden loss of one of her daughters changed her world, her faith and, ultimately, her art.

When Quinn showed his wife what he had filmed, “she looked at it and said, ‘This is a story.’”

“I didn’t understand her art and I didn’t understand her,” Weicher says. “I wanted to appreciate her art and understand more the process of being an artist, that transference of spirit and emotion from the person onto the canvas. She made it easy.”

Weicher bought a better video camera and hired an award-winning editor, Emanuele Secci, who convinced them that they should start entering it in film festivals. It had its premiere at Doc-Utah in September.

Daubenspeck Cliff became interested in art as a young girl, but it took a back seat to her career as a high school art teacher, then as a wife and mother to three daughters, whom she often painted.

Then her middle daughter died of asphyxiation on a trip to Squaw Valley. She was 18.

“Death changes everything,” she says in the film. “The person I am today is a result of that suffering.”

She began searching for meaning and questioning orthodoxies at a Carmelite monastery, acquainting herself with Buddhist practices and meditating at Spirit Rock.

When she was 68, she enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute and got a master’s degree in art.

She funneled what she learned from her spiritual journey as well as her years traveling and living abroad with her now-deceased husband into her vivid paintings. Instead of portraits, she began painting bigger issues – corruption, power, war – or celebrations of the feminine.

“If I’m painting, I want to paint something I feel in my gut. I want to get this out of me,” she says.

“The themes are powerful and vibrant, full of life. Here is a woman full of life,” Quinn says. “I think she’s inspiring. She is an unassuming woman who has heroically taken on tragedy and grown from it.”

Her story has been a motivating force for Quinn and Weicher.

“It became this sort of journey,” Weicher says. “We didn’t start out to do this. It happened. Hers really is a life well lived, and it was a joy to be able to capture this and to share it.”

“Here we are not only inspired by her, but she is the vehicle for us working together,” Quinn explains. “It’s a new chapter for us. So she’s allowed us to move into a new chapter when we didn’t even know there was such a possibility.”

Daubenspeck Cliff doesn't paint as much as she used to; her carpal tunnel syndrome has made it too painful. But she still finds lots of ways to be creative. Creativity is essential, she says.

"The only thing I want people to do is be creative. We were born to be creative. That's how we evolved. To me, when you are creative you are carrying on what man was supposed to do," she says. "I want to say to people, look where your passion is and do it."

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IF YOU GO

What: "Art is the Tree of Life," part of the 27th Wine Country Film Festival's "Art Transforms: an Arts in Film Shorts Program"

When: 6:15 p.m. Sept. 28

Where: Deerfield Ranch Winery Cave, 10200 Sonoma Highway, Kenwood

When: 6:45 p.m. Sept. 29

Where: Dunbar Elementary School, 11700 Dunbar Road, Glen Ellen

Admission: \$10

Information: www.winecountryfilmfest.com

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