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Clouds

These Maine stories will make their big-screen debut at the Camden International Film Festival

by **Lauren Abbate**
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A photo of CJ Twomey is held up at the Pyramids of Giza, where his ashes have been scattered. Credit: Courtesy of Spark Media

At the age of 20, CJ Twomey took his own life. In the years after his death, his mother, Hallie Twomey, couldn't fathom that it was the end for her son. He hadn't traveled to all the places he wanted to go, or experienced the adventures he dreamed of having.

So, in 2013, three years after CJ's death, Twomey took to Facebook to ask if anyone would be willing to help spread her son's ashes.

"I kept looking at [his ashes] and thinking this can't be the end," Twomey said. "It was about wanting to send our son to places that he never got a chance to travel to in life. We really think that if he had lived he would have wanted to go and explore."

She figured friends and family would take her up on the offer. But she never anticipated that hundreds of strangers would end up spreading CJ's ashes in more than 1,000 locations, in more than 100 countries across all seven continents.

The story of Twomey's mission to carry on her son's legacy after his death is the focus of the documentary "Scattering CJ," which premieres at the Camden International Film Festival next month.

The 15th annual film fest kicks off Sept. 12 for a weekend of feature-length and short documentary films. Screenings are held at theaters in Camden, Rockport and Rockland.

This year's festival chronicles a number of Maine stories and subjects, including the one about CJ Twomey, who grew up in Maine and died at his family's home in Auburn. Since his death, his family has moved out of state.

When California-based screenwriter David Lobatto read a BBC News story about Twomey's mission to spread her son's ashes around the world, he knew it was a story that needed no dramatization.

"I was so incredibly moved by it," Lobatto said. "The more I thought about it, there was nothing I could possibly do in an adaptation process that is going to make it more affecting or moving than the actual story itself."

In 2014, Lobatto enlisted the help of documentary filmmaker Andrea Kalin and the two approached Twomey about the possibility of capturing her family's story on film.

"It was really difficult to put blind trust into someone you don't know, but [working with Lobatto and Kalin] felt right from the get go," Twomey said.

When work on the film began in 2014, hundreds of people were reaching out to Twomey every week about how they could help spread CJ's ashes. Since then the family has stopped sending out his ashes in most cases, Twomey said.

The film captures the process of how CJ's ashes were scattered across the globe, including footage from those who helped scatter them. The film also gives a behind-the-scenes look at how the Twomeys were coping with the loss of their son.

"Hallie was so real, raw, courageous and, really, beautiful in her despair and anguish," Kalin said. "It was a tough project, emotionally."

Kalin, Lobatto and Twomey hope that the film serves as a launching point for genuine conversations about mental health and suicide. The filmmakers also hope "Scattering CJ" can shed light on the importance of community and how it can be found in unsuspecting places and circumstances.

But for Twomey, it also helps to ensure that CJ will never be forgotten.

"I'm selfish in all of this. I want the film to be used to spark conversations, to raise awareness about suicide prevention and mental illness. But I want you to remember my son," Twomey said. "He deserves to be remembered for more than his final act."

'Alan Magee: Art Is Not a Solace'

Maine-based artist Alan Magee is the focus of another feature-length film making its debut at the Camden International Film Festival this year. Filmmakers David Berez of Camden and David Wright of Appleton teamed up with Magee to make the film, ["Alan Magee: Art Is Not a Solace."](#)

While initially Berez and Wright set out to make a purely biographical film about Magee, it didn't take long before they realized the film's premise would be about much more than just the artist and his work.

"His art is inspired by some of the social challenges we face as a nation and as a world right now and in the past," Wright said. "So the story obviously grew."

Magee has lived in midcoast Maine since the 1970s, after relocating from Pennsylvania with his wife, Monica. Magee's body of work is expansive and includes paintings, monotypes, sculptures and even short films.

But all of his work strives to serve as social commentary, whether it be about war or gun violence.

This aspect of his work “shaped the film,” Berez said. “At a time where there’s cultural disarray and social disarray, the themes that Alan’s work addresses became more important to the film.”

During the Camden International Film Festival, Magee will have a solo exhibition at the Dowling Walsh Gallery in Rockland.

‘Thirteen Ways’

For Maine filmmaker Ian Cheney, the focus of his newest documentary, “Thirteen Ways,” isn’t a person, but a piece of land located on his parent’s property in Waldoboro.

Over the course of a year, Cheney brought a dozen people, with varying backgrounds, to the property and set them loose to have their own experiences on the land. Participants had backgrounds in areas such as the arts, science and forestry.

“The film is an experience of opening your eyes to different ways of seeing not only the land but the world,” Cheney said. “I think the film’s charm is the surprising places that a very simple plot of land takes people in terms of memories or insights.”

The idea for the film was born out of a short film Cheney produced in which he documented one square meter of his backyard over an entire year. By taking an in-depth look at one small piece of land, Cheney was interested in the amount of meaning he could pull from it.

By bringing a varied group of people to the piece of land in Waldoboro — where he spent his childhood exploring — Cheney said he realized there was so much hidden there that he had never seen.

“You can find wonder in any piece of land if you look long enough and deep enough,” Cheney said. “I like the idea that people will emerge from the film wanting to see their own environment around them in newer and deeper ways.”

The full schedule for the Camden International Film Festival can be found [on its website](#).

