

Sources Revealed | Grace Guggenheim

Oscar-winning family movies

Her father won Academy Awards for his documentaries, her brother directed "An Inconvenient Truth" and her sister-in-law is actress Elisabeth Shue. But it's Grace Guggenheim who's taking the lead in archiving her father's works, a frequently dramatic role she was born to play.

Interview by Jennifer Nycz-Conner

You call your father "Charles." How did that come about? I wanted to establish a professional relationship in the office. You can't be in a meeting and say, "But Dad, I feel..." I really wanted to make it not feel awkward for myself and anybody else. I think in principle that's what you should do.

What's the biggest challenge in your work to preserve his films? As usual, getting funding. That's always such a worry. Always such a worry. I mean, gosh, if I had more funding, more of it would be out. But I really have to connect the dots all the time. It's just like making a film. You gotta have money in order to do it.

The biggest on-camera surprising moment I've ever witnessed was ... When we made "The Johnstown Flood" film in 1989, we filmed in a drought—and it was about a flood....There [had been] massive flooding here in Washington about a year before [and we had filmed some of it] at Great Falls. I remember my father read the paper and said "we have to film tomorrow morning." We crossed the Park Service safety line to film the footage—and it turned out to be the most important footage because we ended up in the next summer filming in a drought.

Best advice my parents ever gave me was: Be kind and tolerant to all people.

Where do you keep Charles' Oscars? Oh, God. They always used to line a closet. They used to never be out. The Oscars slowly started coming out not until probably the last five years of his life. (Guggenheim died of pancreatic cancer in 2002.) And only recently I have been trying to figure out what to do with them because he always used to like to quietly, quietly say "I'd like to give one to each child," which is sweet. Since this documentary film center has been founded in Charles' name at the National Archives, my latest idea is to have his first Oscar on permanent loan there.

The most important lesson about filmmaking that Charles taught you: To listen.

Favorite project of your career: Ugh, that's so unfair.

You don't like superlatives. No, it's so unfair because, for myself, this is sort of an awful thing to say, is that [the films are] each like a child. I mean, you can choose a child, one over the other? I mean, I'm sure people have their favorites. But they're all so different. They're all so different in their own way. And then the lessons you learn from each. I think the beauty is that you're able to come closer to the stories in a way that no one will really know because you've had to live it differently. Living, doing the film. So how can you really choose?

What is the film you'd most like to make if money were no object? A documentary about women war photographers during World War II.

Do you talk shop when you're with your family? I used to with my father a lot, which was difficult because obviously there were always things that had to be worked out, and there was never enough time. Everyone works very differently, but sometimes I got more out of what he was thinking by talking with him, not because he wrote it down and planned. I was more the planner. And if I didn't know ahead of time, I couldn't save every-body else from anxiety.

Was film a part of growing up when you were a kid? That was the strange thing. I don't remember my father ever talking about work growing up. It was just funny stories at the dinner table about his childhood.

Best thing you learned from your worst boss: Loyalty.

The one thing I won't leave home without is ... Right now, it's my dog. He comes to work with me three days a week.

I'd be happy if D.C. had more eligible men.

If I could do any job, it would be a photographer.

The part of my job I hate is ... where you're going to get your funding and your next job.

I wish I could get better at spelling, but that will always be my lifelong problem.

The nicest thing someone did for me today is ... My mother always does something nice. She calls me once a day.

The most frequent question I get about my family is: Are you related to the Guggenheim Museum?

Are you? No. My father always used to say, "not close enough for comfort."

Favorite form of exercise: Tennis.

What's your worst habit? I just pack in too much. I stay at work too late. I don't allow enough time just to sit still and read the paper. To read The New York Times and exercise. How can you not have more time for that?

I miss... my dad, definitely. How can you not miss people who die in your life? And I miss my nephew and nieces (who are in Los Angeles). You can't have enough of that.



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