



Take Five: Grace Guggenheim on a 'facelift' for her father's classic Arch documentary

In [Movies / TV](#)

By [Mary Delach Leonard](#), Beacon staff

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"Monument to the Dream" -- documentarian Charles Guggenheim's masterful 1960s tribute to the builders of the Gateway Arch -- is undergoing a "facelift" to bring it into the digital age.

His daughter Grace Guggenheim, who is overseeing the digitization, acknowledges that it is a heavy responsibility.



"It is really my father's film -- not my film," she said during a phone interview. "I know how much it meant to him, and it's important to me to keep the original integrity."

The digitization was commissioned by the National Park Service, which has been showing the film to visitors at the Arch since 1972. The new version will have subtitles for viewers who cannot hear. And Guggenheim wants to add identifications of workers whose voices were captured in the original film.

The \$90,000 cost is being funded with park fees, according to Ann Honious, chief of Museum Services at the [Jefferson National Expansion Memorial](#). The new version will be shown at the Odyssey Theater, which has a four-story screen, alternating with "Lewis and Clark: Great Journey West."

Guggenheim appreciates the personal connection St. Louisans have with "Monument to the Dream," and she believes the film is as stirring today as it was four decades ago.

"I'm biased, obviously, but it's the only historical reference that gets people to understand the firsthand feeling or experience of what it was like to build this monument. How can you not be moved by it? My brother Jonathan said, 'How is it possible that a film can be made about a structure and make you cry?' And that's what this film does," she said.



Photos provided by Grace Guggenheim

A family photo made by Charles Guggenheim: P. [Philip] Davis Guggenheim, Marion Streett Guggenheim, Grace Guggenheim, Jonathan Guggenheim

Guggenheim, 54, shared with the Beacon a black-and-white family photo that is an iconic image of mid-'60s St. Louis: Her mom Marion Streett Guggenheim and the three Guggenheim siblings -- Philip Davis, Grace and Jonathan -- are clustered together on the Mississippi riverfront, with the makings of the Gateway Arch looming in the sky above them. Charles couldn't be in the picture because he was where he always was: behind the camera, charged with recording the moment.

It took more than two years to construct the Arch, and Guggenheim shadowed the workers, documenting the ingenuity and muscle they poured into the two towering "legs" that finally met 630 feet above the city on Oct. 28, 1965. Guggenheim, who had been hired by the Park Service, understood what many of his subjects wouldn't realize until much later -- these men were making history, one triangular stainless steel section at a time.

Vito Comporato, who appeared in several scenes of "Monument to the Dream," [told the Beacon in 2009](#) that he didn't comprehend the importance of what he had helped accomplish until "topping out" day.

Meet the Builders



Mary Delach Leonard
Vito Comporato, in 2009

When: 9-11:30 a.m., Sat., Oct. 27

Where: Visitors center, Gateway Arch

What: Annual event that commemorates the Oct. 28, 1965, “topping out” of the Arch. Visitors can meet engineers and ironworkers who built the monument.

How much: Free

"We knew we were working on something different and fun. It was a unique job and a great opportunity, but most of us were just happy to be working," said Comporato, who served as a signalman to the crane operator who hoisted the sections into place.

Workers didn't wear safety harnesses back then, and neither did Guggenheim. Though it was predicted that 13 workers would die during the construction, no one did -- a fact that is driven home by scenes of men skywalking on steel.

Grace Guggenheim admires the poetry of the narration but points out that the beautiful words were inspired by keen observation and detailed research.

“ ‘Forming building blocks heavy as a locomotive’ -- who thinks of that? You have to feel that,” she said. “They had to know the facts to make the poetry, and clearly it couldn't be written unless you knew the end of the story,” she said. “Visually, you are looking at the monument itself, but the essence is really men make things with their hands -- and that has not changed.”

Guggenheim, a noted documentarian in her own right, started working with her father in 1986. She is president of [Guggenheim Productions, Inc.](#), headquartered in Washington and manages the preservation of her late father's legacy. He died in 2002.

Here are more excerpts from the Beacon's conversation with Grace Guggenheim:

Charles Guggenheim at work





What is the overall goal of this project?

Guggenheim: It's to preserve an historical film that's important to keep alive. This film is irreplaceable -- who could recreate the feeling of how these workers worked? You can't recreate that. The investment of keeping this film alive is very smart. The film captures the pride of these men and what it took to build the monument. Even though you might not know all the specifics, you know there was a risk. Some things in life have good fates and this one did, even though it took a long time to get there.

And it is symbolic on so many different levels for so many different people. [The Arch] was an engineering masterpiece. It was a design masterpiece. It's like so many things in life, there's another story behind it -- how it got made.

This is important work but also personal for you, is it not?

Guggenheim: I'm such a nerd. What I love about doing these technical projects is that I get to study them. I spent 18 years making films for my father; I didn't have time to breathe. Many times I would make a film with him and it would take me years before I could really look at it as a film. I would look at it and say, "That's what I had to do; I wish I had done that." It's the memory of all the things I had to live through to get it there.

Now, I get to really look and see, how is Charles using music? How is he using narration? How is it cut? How do those effects come early before a cut? And to enjoy it, the beauty of it.

Charles died 10 years ago this coming October, I've had to become a student of his films, even though I worked for him. I now have to know what is it that he did. People come to me and ask me about his career. What influenced him?

I also think this was a turning-point film in his career. The essence of what he was doing was still there, but stylistically something changed because of the mobility of cameras. Cameras had been bulky; they were heavy. And you see Charles on the top of the Arch with a Bell & Howell that was a teeny camera that only held minutes of footage. Who knows what they had to do just to get the pieces they needed.

I think that the little that I could pick up from him -- because there was a lot that we didn't talk about -- he probably felt that "Monument to the Dream" had his least number of regrets. We had limited budgets, you were always trying to press to make sure that you had enough time to do this and this, where other types of filmmakers who have large budgets they might mix it and see how it sounds and go back and do it again. I think Charles was a real perfectionist, and I think he felt that this was close to perfection for him.

How complicated is this process?

Guggenheim: The documentary is getting a 2k digital restoration so that it can be projected in digital cinema. It is my understanding that the film will be shown in the Odyssey Theater. The screen is huge. One of my worries is, will it show well there?

The film was made in 16mm, and 16mm films are mono. But the music was recorded in stereo. What's exciting is that we're going to get a chance to make the film in stereo, meaning the music. Charles always wanted to be able to do that.

The tricky part will be the mix.



Provided

Charles and Grace Guggenheim during the filming of their documentary "Berga: Soldiers of Another War."

The mix is the confluence of balancing all of the audio effects together. That includes narration, dialogue, effects and music. A very robust theatrical film typically is in stereo and sometimes surround [sound], meaning your speakers are around the theater. The optimum is that you have a center speaker for the narration and to the left and right are your effects and music. And that gets balanced together.

In order to do what we're doing you have to analyze the mix itself and see how it works. We have to go back and find the original narration, the original music, the original effects and the dialogue and remix them,

essentially. And we can because amazingly the elements are intact.

Part of the scope of work with the Park Service is we're taking all of these elements and transferring them digitally. So we're preserving them in another generation, but digitally.

How challenging is it to stay true to the original work?

Guggenheim: If a production person starts a dissolve earlier, I don't want that. I want it to be exactly the same.

I did get Charles' approval to change the type on the film. The original lettering of the film was very '60s. Bold. It wasn't classic enough. We did that together, so I have his blessing in that.

The good news is I'm working with people I know.

Life changes. It's sad for me. I still think film has a purity about it. I'm feeling old. I'm feeling stodgy. I'm texting, sure, but as a photographer I was shocked that my local lab doesn't make black and white prints anymore. And I'm wondering, will prints survive?

"Monument to the Dream" has stood the test of time. What do you believe is the lasting message of the film?

Guggenheim: For me it's just such a confluence about what this country is all about. The unknown. Taking on the unknown. The bravery of the unknown. It's at the site where Lewis and Clark started their adventures, and here we are. The impossible was conceived. The impossible was created.