

Unlisted: A story of schizophrenia

a documentary film by DELANEY RUSTON



A doctor's journey to stop hiding from for her troubled dad

(USA, 2010, 56:46 minutes)

In collaboration of Oregon Public Broadcasting, American Public Television (APT) releases *Unlisted* to PBS stations starting October 2010, coinciding with Mental Illness Awareness Week

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Synopsis

Why do we see so many severely mentally ill people on the street, often off treatment and nearly always alone? Physician and filmmaker Delaney Ruston, whose own father, Richard Ruston, has paranoid schizophrenia and at times lived on the street, takes viewers along on a deeply personal journey to reconnect with her estranged father. Can she make sense of the devastation that his illness has caused? Should she resume her childhood role of acting as her dad's doctor, or is caring for him in that way hindering her from truly caring for him?

After years of feeling helpless when her father would come searching for her in psychotic states, Delaney finally decided to become unlisted in the phone book. But now, ten years later, Delaney, as a mother and doctor, feels a pull to reconnect with her father.

As the film opens, we meet Richard, a poet and novelist, doing well on a new medicine. And while he is thinking clearer than Delaney has ever seen him, she realizes that her fears of her dad going off therapy trumps all else. What will happen if he goes off treatment? Will doors be closed as has happened in the past?

It's these fears that propel Delaney to explore why it has been so difficult to get mental health treatment for her father, as well as for her patients. Delaney gains insights from others, including her local congressman and psychiatrist, Jim McDermott, who was a practicing psychiatrist in the 1960s when the policies that dictate our current mental health system were formed.

In the hopes of feeling closer to her dad, Delaney struggles to get to know his past and the way in which his illness has impacted their relationship. It is easy for Ruston to recall the shame that her father's behaviors caused her, like when he would come yelling for her on her school campuses. But what was life like for her dad? Medical school taught her the science of his illness, not the experience of it. So Delaney turns to the novel her father wrote during the early years of his illness, when he was a graduate student at UC Berkeley. Animations of his novel paint a haunting picture of a mind aware that it was slowly disconnecting with the world around him.

Delaney begins to feel a new connection with her dad when, as is often the case with severe mental illness, things change suddenly. As Delaney feared, her dad stops taking his medicine, and then goes missing. What starts as an emotional tale of reconciliation turns into a frantic journey for survival. Ruston's search for her father—combined with her search for answers as to why his care has proven so inadequate—provide both a dramatic story and a probing social commentary.

Unlisted is a soul-searching examination into the nature of responsibility and the transformative process of reconciliation. While this powerful film deals with a weighty subject, it is tinged throughout with humor and bewilderment that helps to dispel many of the old myths around mental illness. Audiences will be moved to reflect upon their own ideas of mental illness, compassion, and responsibility.

Credits

(USA 2010, 56:46 minutes)

PRODUCER/DIRECTOR/WRITTER/EDITOR

Delaney Ruston, MD

ADDITIONAL EDITING

William Hauge, A.C.E

CINEMATOGRAPHER

Geoff Schaaf

ORIGINAL MUSIC

Stephen Thomas Cavit

CREATIVE CONSULTANT

Steven Okazaki

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

Jenni Nelson

ANIMATION

Mike Baran

POST PRODUCTION EDITING

Jim Golvingo at Golpost

SOUND DESIGN

Dave Howe at Bad Animals

About The Crew

DELANEY RUSTON, MD (director/producer/writer and editor) Since 1997, Dr. Ruston has produced and directed documentaries dealing with controversial medical themes that have been featured in film festivals, national conferences, distributed to over 100 medical institutions, and broadcast on television. *Unlisted: A Story of Schizophrenia* is Ruston's first feature documentary and follows her emotional journey to reconnect with her schizophrenic father after hiding from him for 10 years. *Unlisted* began as a short film which aired on PBS and was a FREEDIE Award Finalist.

Ruston recently completed the short film, *Crisis in Control*, which explores a new type of living will for mental health patients. Currently in post-production is the feature documentary, *Where in the World is Mental Health?* This film follows the lives of people living with severe mental illness in France, China, India, and the US.

Ruston completed medical school at Stanford University, followed by a residency in Internal Medicine and fellowship Medical Ethics at the University of California, San Francisco. Since then, Ruston has divided her time between filmmaking and providing primary medical care in clinics for underserved patients in Seattle.

WILLIAM HAUGSE (additional editing) is the recipient of an Academy Award nomination for his editing on *Hoop Dreams*. With over 35 years of filmmaking and editing experience, Haugse has contributed to a long list of acclaimed documentaries including, *The No Impact Man*, *Stevie*, and *The Last Days of Kennedy and King*.

STEVEN OKAZAKI (creative consultant) is the recipient of numerous honors, including an Oscar® Award, three Academy Award nominations, a Peabody, and a Primetime Emmy. Okazaki's most recent Academy Award nomination was in 2009 for the documentary, *The Conscience of Nhem En*. Other acclaimed documentaries include *White Light/Black Rain*, *Black Tar Heroin*, *Days of Waiting*, and *Rehab*.

GEOFF SCHAAF (cinematographer) has nearly 25 years experience as a cinematographer in feature films and documentaries, earning a total of four Emmy Awards and thirteen Emmy nominations.

JENNI NELSON (associate producer) is credited for her production work on the PBS series *Biz Kid\$*, the feature film, *Napoleon Dynamite*, and several other films.

STEPHEN THOMAS CAVIT (composer) is a Seattle based, Emmy award winning composer whose work has been featured in numerous Sundance, HBO and PBS films. Some of his credits include *Everything's Cool*, *The Good Girl*, *Blue Vinyl*, and *The Meaning of Food*.

Director Statement

For years I felt conflicted about having disconnected from my father. I told myself that without my contact information my dad would no longer be tempted to come searching for me in a psychotic state, and I could avoid the pain of not being able to get him help. Five years ago I decided to stop hiding. Part of the catalyst for this decision was my growing need to tell my story; a story that while unique in its details is universal in its themes.

Severe mental illness tears families apart, but not for the reasons that make tabloid headlines. Yes, the symptoms of these illnesses can be devastating, but what really tears families apart is their inability to get treatment for their family member. The frustrations and heartache that comes from not being able to get care causes thousands of family members to disconnect. Over the years, the films I have seen about mental illness, have portrayed devoted caretakers, but I had a need to expose the other side of the story, family members who are themselves deeply conflicted by the realities of deciding not to care for an ill family member.

Not only was I propelled to give a new voice to family, but also to give a more typical picture of someone suffering from severe mental illness. The stories we hear in the media focus on a few famous individuals (Van Gogh or John Nash, for example) or a few notorious ones (the rare, but terrifying person shooting at strangers). My dad, on the other hand, represents the more common face of mental illness; a regular guy who wanted a career and a family, but was constantly stymied by his disordered thought process

With *Unlisted* I wanted to give viewers a background on why getting mental health treatment is so difficult. My hope is that this knowledge will not only help viewers understand why so many people sit untreated on our streets, but why things do not have to stay this way. I hope that viewers will have a foundation from which to take action; be it simply taking a moment to validate the existence of someone living on the streets or working to create a more functional and compassionate mental health system.

Finally, my hope is that after seeing *Unlisted* viewers will be more motivated to discuss mental illness, for if it is not present in their own family, it certainly is present in a family of someone they know. Greater than any statistic, what most reminds us of the prevalence of mental illness, and the obstacles to treating it, are these conversations.

Press

1. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer **FRONT PAGE** lead article that took up nearly 2 full pages of the newspaper and was the most emailed story for three days. (March 2, 2009)

Read full article below or view on line with all the photos at http://www.seattlepi.com/local/401885_filmaker02.html

2. Local NPR radio interview for the prime time show, KUOW Presents. Summer 2009 and aired repeatedly . Listen at <http://www.kuow.org/program.php?id=17737>

3. Ruston was interviewed live on a Seattle radio show in October 2009. Listen at http://conversationslive.net/index2.php?option=com_podcast&feed=RSS2.0&no_html=1

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Documenting a troubled mind

Movie helps filmmaker forge connection with mentally ill father

Monday, March 2, 2009

By CAROL SMITH
P-I REPORTER

The cyclists rolling by on their way to Green Lake don't seem to notice the man sitting vigil under the Ravenna Boulevard overpass. The man wears a bicycle helmet over his baseball cap and dark glasses on a dark day. Though he camps in plain sight, it's easy to overlook those such as Leon Barker, whose minds have long since abandoned them.

Delaney Ruston parks near Barker's encampment on a recent freezing afternoon. The filmmaker first noticed him a few years ago. The doctor in her made her stop to check on him. But it's another role from her life that keeps her coming back to visit.

Ruston, 42, is the daughter of a man who had paranoid schizophrenia. His illness caused her so much shame and frustration as a teenager and young adult that she unlisted her phone number and hid from him for a decade while she built a career in medicine and started a family.

When her own son started asking questions about his grandfather, however, she realized she was the one who needed answers.

To get them, Ruston turned to filmmaking, documenting her effort to end her estrangement from her father and reconcile how his mental illness had shaped her childhood. She now hopes her film, shot over a period of years, will spark more public discussion about how society disconnects from those with mental illness and how that fault line ends up breaking families apart.

She also hopes to break the cycle of fear and misunderstanding about mental illness with her own children.

"I didn't want to continue that legacy," she said.

Barker lights up as Ruston arrives. Her two children crowd in to say hello. They still play with the plastic tic-tac-toe game he gave them the first time they visited.

On this occasion, Barker fishes a remote control from one of his sacks and launches a long, animated description of its functions, which he believes include operating a space shuttle. His conversation is hard to follow, but his body language is not. He bumps fists with the children and shows off a bicycle he's fixing. When they prepare to leave, Barker presses a hand-crank phone -- the kind designed for use in an emergency -- into Ruston's son's hands.

Voice-over

"Dad? Dad?"

Ruston's voice echoed through the Bad Animals sound studio in Belltown on a recent afternoon as she and sound designer David Howe worked on the final voice-over.

The question reverberates, while images of Ruston searching for her missing father flicker in the dark on a screen over the sound-control panel.

Asking questions that produced no answers, or answers that didn't make sense, was one of the hallmarks of Ruston's communication with her father as his mental illness took hold.

Richard Ruston was a handsome, gifted English student doing graduate work at the University of California-Berkeley when he married Delaney Ruston's mother, an English teacher. A poet and aspiring novelist, he showed few overt signs then that he was living in an increasingly imaginary world.

After his daughter was born, Richard Ruston's mental condition deteriorated. His erratic behavior, loud outbursts and occasional psychiatric hospitalizations strained the young marriage. He climbed telephone poles and shouted at passers-by. The family was evicted

five times. Eventually, Ruston's mother escaped with her daughter in search of a normal life.

Ruston continued to see her father and his relatives in Los Angeles, however. He taught her to play chess, and they walked the Santa Monica Pier together.

"I always knew he was different than other dads," she said. "But this was Berkeley in the 1960s. All the dads were different."

As she grew up, he became fixated on being near her and also clung to the delusion of an academic career, even while living on the street, or landing in jail.

His life work, an unpublished semiautobiographical novel, is eerily self-diagnostic -- showing flashes of brilliance and insight, humor and anger, while at the same time being impossible to follow or understand.

His daughter was never sure what to believe. She became a child-caretaker, urging him to take the medications that kept him stable and becoming frightened when he refused.

Eventually, their relationship frayed.

"He would show up at my schoolyard, screaming for me," she said. "He came 500 miles once to find me."

By the time she was in medical school, he would appear, disheveled and agitated, pleading with her to take care of him but refusing treatment.

She barricaded herself emotionally, blocking out her feelings, and then finally cut off contact for her own sanity.

Ruston sits framed in the sound booth and waits for Howe to cue her, then reads a line from her dad's novel:

"Where would Duncan go?" she reads. "He walked along the shoulder ... the way a flea moves, through a dog's fur. This new city terrified him, and it terrified him because he had no place in it."

Tracking shot

It would be 10 years before Ruston reached back out to her father. Trained in internal medicine at Stanford University Medical Center, Ruston rotated through the same hospital where Ken Kesey, author of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," once worked. Now she wondered whether her new lens -- as a physician -- could help her better manage and understand her relationship with her father.

In 2005, Ruston received grant funding from the National Endowment for the Arts' "New Voices" program through 911 Media Arts Center's studio in Seattle to support shooting of the documentary.

Over the next year, she re-established contact with her father, who by then was living in supportive housing in Los Angeles, where he received assistance with his medication and some supervision. The medication and roof over his head gave him a kind of stability that let her re-enter his life.

"It's not a nightmare now," she said. "It's just mental illness."

She visited him three times. When she took her son along, her father played chess with him. The portrait that emerges is of a man who is cranky and complex but also funny and by turns tender and tormented. He never asked her the purpose of her film.

At one point, a former schoolmate of her father's, who is now a therapist, asked him why he thought his daughter was filming him.

"She wants to find out who she is," her father told his friend, a moment caught on film. "She's on an identity search."

Dissolve

The fourth time Ruston went to film her father, he had gone missing. The staff from his housing facility called to tell her he had disappeared. She got on a plane the next day.

What followed was the frantic search that millions of families with mentally ill loved ones will recognize -- not knowing where the family member has gone. Blocked by law from getting information from hospitals. Fearing the worst.

Before his disappearance, he had been calling Ruston, sounding disoriented. She suspected he had gone off his medications. Then he stopped taking her calls entirely.

A few days later, he phoned a relative and said he had gone to Las Vegas. The relative persuaded him to come back. He promised he would return to his house and see a psychiatrist. He promised the psychiatrist he would see him again a few days later.

Ruston returned to Seattle to start the long editing process that would shape her 80 hours of digital video into a story. Ruston, who has made several short films, had input from acclaimed filmmakers, including three-time Oscar nominee Steven Okazaki and "Hoop Dreams" editor William Hauge in making this one.

She was sitting with one of her editors when the phone rang.

"It was a Monday at 1 p.m.," she said. The director of the home was on the other end of the line.

Before dawn Sunday, Oct. 16, 2005, her father had packed his belongings into a few boxes and walked down to the Santa Monica Pier.

He had handed his wallet to a young couple. Before they could stop him, he jumped in.

Cutaway

Ruston is grateful, now, to have had the chance to reconnect with her father.

"To this day, I don't understand how his mind worked," she said. But she's accepted that. She sees, instead, where her stubborn streak came from and her dedication to her family.

The film gave her a chance to see him differently, not only through her own eyes, but also through the eyes of others.

"The thing I was most surprised by was how much people enjoyed my father. I do feel like my heart opened up," she said. "It was bittersweet when he died. I was so thankful to have the pain."

Her experience with her father has shaped her work as a doctor. She knows, when she see patients who are homeless and mentally ill, that there is likely a family member, somewhere, who hopes somebody is looking out for his or her loved one.

About half the patients Ruston sees have some underlying mental illness. It's habit, now, for her to ask her patients whether they have a sense of belonging somewhere -- a sense of worth.

People with severe mental illness are at high risk of suicide. Rare cases of violence caused by people with severe, untreated mental illness tend to grab public attention, but it's vastly more common for people with mental illness to be victims of violence themselves, or die by their own hand.

A diagnosis of mental illness can be devastating for families, said Nancy Cole, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness -- Greater Seattle. "It's incredibly important when someone like Delaney speaks out. The more people understand, the less frightened they are of it."

The theme of Ruston's film also resonates with Joe Martin, co-founder of Pike Market Medical Clinic, where Ruston works three days a week as a physician.

"There's a great deal of disconnect with the people we see here," said Martin, who is also a social worker.

"Many of them have no family, or the family's been alienated. People like us become friends."

Fade to black

Ruston knelt on the floor in the basement office of her University District home a few weeks ago with a box containing the last of her father's belongings.

A few days earlier, she had submitted her full-length documentary, titled "Unlisted: A Story of Schizophrenia," for the Seattle International Film Festival starting in May. She also hopes to have her film shown at other festivals and on public television.

Finishing the film has been a way to deal with her grief. Unpacking her father's boxes remains one of her final tasks.

She opens a box and searches the detritus of his life. She pulls out the teddy-bear pin he always wore on his lapel, a cell phone that was their last link, a trophy that marked her father as the 2000 chess champion at Step Up, his residence. The pile grows around her on the floor, fragments of a picture she can't quite assemble, a chess game interrupted.

She reads a letter he had written her, which he signed, "Love, your old pop, Richard."

Her emotions well up. She spends a few more minutes with the last things her father touched. Her children will be home soon. They will be curious what their grandfather left behind.

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