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# The Secret is out

Sarah O'Brien

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**The Secret Is Out**

**By**

**Sarah M. O'Brien**

Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) in Film

Thesis Paper

School of Film and Animation

College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology

August 1, 2011

**ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
COLLEGE OF IMAGING ARTS AND SCIENCES  
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION  
GRADUATE THESIS PAPER**

**DATE:** August 1, 2011

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**Submitted By:** SARAH M. O'BRIEN

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**TITLE:** *THE SECRET IS OUT* **GENRE:** DOCUMENTARY

**LENGTH:** 28 MINUTES **FORMAT:** DIGITAL VIDEO

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## **II. *The Secret Is Out* Abstract**

Family... what defines family is different for each individual. As we face a shrinking economy and difficult job placement, family is our primary focus as we get through the tough times. The nuclear family (husband, wife, children and dog) does not include divorce, extended family, aging family, or many other issues that trouble today's modern families.

What if your family is not what society considers typical? What if your family includes gay parents or loved ones? With television shows like *Modern Family* and *Grey's Anatomy*, gay couples are more present but what are their real life experiences?

*The Secret Is Out* explores the observations of a child growing up in the 1980s with one gay parent and one straight parent. This documentary compares the filmmaker's personal story to what children with gay parent families experience today. The filmmaker's exploration into the subject resulted in a creative odyssey that had unexpected results. Is the secret really out?

### **III. Table of Contents**

Introduction	p. 1
Inspiration	p. 2
Initial Approach	p. 5
Subjects	p. 6
Struggle Within the Medium	p. 8
Last Attempt	p. 10
Ethics and Documentary	p. 11
Sebastian	p. 13
New Approach	p. 15
Structure	p. 16
Imagery	p. 18
Sound	p. 20
Editing	p. 21
Filmmaker as Subject	p. 22
Conclusion	p. 23
Draft One of <i>The Secret Is Out</i> Working script	p. 24
Thesis Film Proposal	p. 30

## **Introduction**

Stories. Since the beginning of time, humans have relished the art of story telling. Stories are what we relate to, stories define who we are. Think about it- all of your life experiences, all of your memories, they are stories that you relate to people through words and images. Stories are what remind us of our humanity and our history.

As I child, I was always interested in stories. It did not matter what kind of story it was, truth or fiction, I wanted to know more about people, places, and processes. It was storytelling that originally drew me into filmmaking.

What does it mean to be a filmmaker? With the accessibility of technology and media, what is the difference between someone who records their child's piano recital versus a filmmaker? Filmmakers go beyond simple action- filmmakers are visual and aural linguists who explore new and innovative ways to communicate their story. Basically, we are storytellers. Filmmakers have the ability to take raw footage and discover the story within. Genre or film form is not important- narrative, documentary, animation- as long as you can create an emotional and human connection within the images before you.

As I studied the art of filmmaking, I was inevitably drawn toward documentary. When creating a fiction film, you work from a script to create the cinematic piece. Documentary is less controlled, less structured, and can be less formulaic. Within the documentary genre, the filmmaker has the choice to relate to the nature of their subject in an authentic, unplanned manner.

I love the chaos of documentary. One of the main challenges in creating a documentary film is that the initial premise does not necessarily reveal itself to you in the manner that you think it will. Like a puzzle, you have to take what you have shot, absorb it, and find the underlying story. For some, this process can be daunting. For me, the process of making documentaries is liberating.

Each person has his or her story to tell. While mainstream society tends to gravitate toward celebrity and fame, I am more interested in the individual. Each individual is unique and important. We are all connected in one way or another and to understand our differences and similarities is crucial to understanding the human condition.

### **Inspiration**

There are many ways to approach making a documentary film. What first comes to mind? Wild life documentaries? Historical documentaries? Music documentaries? Entrenched in what you see as a documentary is a structure and approach that should be hidden and slowly revealed.

In the documentary *Chronicle of A Summer*, I love the camera work, the following of subjects, the intimacy of the characters and the nature of the relationships created through the film. As a viewer, you feel like a voyeur, watching some of these troubled ‘therapy’ sessions continue. Historically, it captures Paris in 1960- all of the hopes, neuroses, and traumas as they recover from World War II. Somehow, I wanted to capture that level of passion within my subjects in my thesis film.

While exploring potential thesis subject matter, I reflected on my own life. While growing up, regardless of your environment or situation, you have key sensory emotional cues that can enable you to recall your childhood memories and emotions. These emotional cues might be things like the smell of a campfire, the softness of your Grandmother's skin, the coo of your mother's voice, the smell of pine trees throughout the holidays, and so on. For me, it is sitting in the window of my father's loft apartment in Greenwich Village, staring out at the Empire State Building and the sound of my mother's voice singing and reading me stories at bedtime. These flashes of memories from my childhood were the original inspiration for *The Secret Is Out*. While these memories are personal in nature, these experiences are things that anyone can relate to.

I began to look at old photographs and came across this image:



(Appendix A)

Looking at this image, each person looks happy, normal, and healthy. What you may not realize is that it is me, my father, mother, stepfather, and



father's lover taking the picture. The context of this picture goes against 'societal norms' but instead depicts a family that is very different from most families that you read about in 1982, when this picture was taken.

Growing up as a child in the 1980s with birth of HIV and AIDS, it was stressful to have a parent who was openly gay. There were no public parades, television shows or support groups. It was just me and my family- whom I loved very much and wanted to protect.

Wouldn't it be interesting to explore what a child's experience is in the 2000 versus the 1980s? As someone who faced the challenges of having a gay parent in the 1980s, it seemed to me that the environment for these 'unique' families had changed a great deal. There are openly gay characters on television, in the media and in our public rhetoric. By exploring the experience of a child today versus a child in the 1980s, I was certain that the evolution of the movement through the eyes of children would be fascinating. I wanted to know what these children felt, what their friends felt, and how their families reacted to any controversy. Were these families out to their neighbors, schools and extended families? I was certain they were, after all, what do they have to hide? Wouldn't it be fantastic to interview a child growing up in a gay household today versus a child who grew up in a gay household in the 1980s?

## **Initial Approach**

Cinema verite, the style that *Chronicle of A Summer* was shot, is my favorite documentary genre. Translated, cinema verite means free cinema. The idea was that you let people interact without emphasis the camera's presence. Within my thesis approach, I wanted to follow children with a gay parent to their schools, their extracurricular activities and their daily familial interaction. By giving them their own hand held camera, I wanted to give them the power to make their own short piece about their life to be included within the film.

To juxtapose the experiences of a subject today, I wanted to find an adult who grappled with the challenges of growing up with a gay parent in the 1980s. I would interview that adult subject and utilize archival footage to exemplify the challenges of society in the 1980s. I also wanted to include personal photographs of that subject from that era to give a well rounded view of the 1980s.

Within the interviews, I wanted to focus on typical family rituals and dynamics to see how each subject handled the challenges of the parent's partner. I also wanted to explore if the subject felt different or unloved. Much of the literature that is written against gay families is that these families breed people to be gay. I disagree with that theory. If anything, these parents wish normalcy for their children since they have faced a life of adversity. I wanted this film to counterbalance those allegations.

## **Subjects**

For the first three years of this project, the most difficult part was the search for subjects. While researching my proposal, I had three families eager to be involved in the film. They felt the subject matter was important and liked my approach.

Subject A was a lesbian who lived in New York City. She had a partner with two adopted sons. She was one of my father's best friends and has known me since I was eight years old. Subject A was my 'sure thing.' One of the main issues was that she was still emotional about the loss of my father and it pained her when we got together. When she saw me, I reminded her of him. My approach was that if we spent more time together, those feelings would change from pain to comfort. The comfort would come from the fact that my father's legacy, me, was thriving. I got my crew together and went to NYC to shoot. The night before we were to begin shooting, she called. Subject A and her partner had been on an adoption waiting list for two years. The birth mother was in Ohio and in labor. Unfortunately, Ohio state laws stipulate that a couple must reside within state for 30 days prior to moving an adopted child to another state. I understood the importance of their departure. Unfortunately, over the course of the next three years, there were other scheduled shooting opportunities in NYC where we were slated to shoot but they cancelled at the last minute.

Subjects B were a male couple with a 12 year old son, living in the Finger Lakes. The couple, who worked with my mother, was thrilled by a chance to participate in the film. We made an initial contact, discussed the variables of the

project, and then scheduled a shoot date. I was thrilled by the idea of interviewing a 12 year old. He was the perfect age and very articulate. One of the couple lost his job and they moved out of state to pursue work elsewhere. Unfortunately, they left without notifying me prior to the shoot. The last thing you think of when your family is in transition is of a filmmaker who is trying to shoot a documentary of you. I think the crisis of their private life is what caused them to step away from the project.

Subject C was a female executive I used to work with in my corporate days. We have been friends socially for over 10 years. Her father, who was a world renowned writer, was gay. Her parents never divorced and at times, her mother would go pick up men for her husband. Not only would Subject C be a perfect fit within the film but her childhood would lend an interesting story angle in contrast to my story. When I approached her about the film, she was pleased that I was exploring the topic and eager to help. We set up a date to shoot and from that point on I never heard from her again. Subject C suffered from depressive issues and I wonder if exploring that part of her life was emotionally too difficult.

After this initial search, per my advisor's recommendation, I placed ads on Craigslist for interview subjects. The experience was horrifying. The respondents were persons either looking to get together for sex or to condemn me for exploring such a topic. It made me quite nervous and left me feeling slightly exposed. It is not an experience I would recommend when exploring topics that are this taboo and can be seen as sexually related.

Friends and family members began to recommend potential subjects. I made hundreds of phone calls, wrote many emails, and sent tens of letters. I got no bites. At this point, it was 2008 and the economy was beginning to tank. I felt saddened by the lack of response for what seemed such an important topic. How was I going to be able to sell this film to subjects? It was at that point I realized that I was becoming one of the main characters in my film and would need to delve deep into my sense memory to create the story.

### **Struggle Within the Medium**

As a woman, living in the post feminist movement, I am constantly torn by the impulses to create home versus my need to make films. Life can be so distracting. The role of a female artist is to find that balance between art and home. Finding that balance, living up to that challenge, is not as easy as it sounds.

From the moment we are born, our gender identities are reinforced by the toys we play with, the games we engage in, and the schools that educate us. I like to refer to this as feminine anesthesia. With the constant reinforcement of gender roles, women are essentially anesthetized to continue living as a subjugate. Adding that element into the arts, it is even more difficult for women. To fight what we inherently know in order to advance our art takes a tenacity that must come from within.

When I went to school to get my BFA in the 1990s, I was one of four women in a department of sixty. After graduating, I worked in advertising for

over ten years prior to deciding to go back to school to receive my MFA. It was not until graduate school that I realized how tough it really can be for women in the arts.

Many men in arts academia want to believe that they are forward thinking. In actuality, they do everything in the power to continue reinforcing these gender roles. For example, on an earlier film, I was screening rushes with an RIT professor who more interested in how my female subjects looked versus what they were saying. This professor was very open to articulating his thoughts even referring to one subject as hot. There was another professor who would constantly berate my choices, even down to my pen color, as opposed to having an open thoughtful discussion about approach. I love critiques when they pertain to my work for they only encourage growth.

As an artist, you practice your craft. Through constant practice, you develop your skills and abilities. Film as a medium is difficult enough. I do not expect everyone to enjoy my work. In an educational setting, I have an expectation of a quality education. Honestly, I thought that these caricatures of the old boys network that keep women where they want to see then was a myth. My master's degree proved me wrong. Misogyny is alive and well in academia.

Fortunately, my thesis committee personified quality and excellence. Throughout the making of my thesis film, I struggled with subjects, content and ethics. My committee was invaluable in helping me overcome those hurdles.

## **Last Attempt**

As I pitched my film as exploring special families, I found that subjects were more receptive to participation in the film. My favorite was Subject M. I came across Subject M through her mother's lover Subject O. Subject M was 33. I conducted a two hour telephone interview with her about her experiences. It was like we were sisters. She spoke about how Subject O, her mother's lover for over 25 years, had attended all of her graduations, surgeries, and births. She loved her very much and considered her a parent. She was also vexed that there was no word for her- step mother, step father, etc.

Subject M told me a particularly poignant story about a life threatening situation that arose. Her sister's gall bladder ended up bursting and Subject O got her to the emergency room. Once they got her stabilized, they asked Subject O about her relationship to the family. Once she explained who she was, they told her that since she was not legally a family member, she must leave. Subject O just saved the life of a child who had been in her life for over 12 years but could not get any information on her status or sit in the waiting room for her.

We were planning to shoot the following Monday. I called the night before to confirm the time and Subject M answered the phone crying. "I am so sorry but I cannot participate. You see my mother has told us (both Subject M and Subject O) that if we participate in this film, she will never speak to either of us again. She is not out and does not want to be outed in the film." Immediately, I told her that was OK...we could work around it. I could shoot her in silhouette or extreme close up to not reveal any details that would confirm that it was her.

She told me that her mother was firm. Her mother had stated that she was a mother, not a lesbian. Subject M responded by saying, “Mom, you are gay. You have been living with a woman for 20 years as a partner.” Nothing would change her mother’s mind.

Now, since Subject M was legally an adult- 33 years old, I asked her if she wanted to participate anyway. She understood the importance of the film but did not want to cause any long term issues with her mother. Subject M just gave birth to her second child and needed her mother’s support.

As a filmmaker, when you have a solid premise and visual treatment ready to go but no one to carry it out, it is very challenging. Throughout the making of this film, I had 15 families/subjects booked, all of which backed out. When Subject M dropped out, I went to the Thousand Islands to clear my head. I began to notice that there was a pattern to the way people were not participating in my film. I always thought people were like me and my family- out and proud. Obviously, based on response, that theory was incorrect. In actuality, the secret was not out. I would have to be the one to tell the story.

### **Ethics and Documentary**

As a documentarian, are we held to a certain level of ethical standards?  
For example, with Subject M, should I have pushed her harder and harder?  
Would it be ethical for me to consciously compromise the subject’s relationship with her family in order to get footage that I desperately needed and desired?



Taking into account my closeness to the subject matter, I think I could not push her. I know how fragile and short our familial relationships are, who was I to risk hers? At the same time, both of us felt that this project was really important. This was a really deep struggle.

How do you ask someone to risk their story for your film? In this modern age, where anything can be found with the click of a mouse, how do we grapple with exposing our subjects to potential ridicule and persecution? Normally, I approach a subject as a source with answers. If I delve deep enough, I can expose their inner core. With my love of storytelling, I feel that is a decent sacrifice to make.

In the 1972 PBS series, *An American Story*, the Loud family welcomed a team of filmmakers into their home with the promise of showing America the 'typical American family.' The result was a sensational story that was manipulated and driven by the producer. In the documentary, the oldest son Lance was outed as gay. The mother decided to divorce her husband, on camera, after discovering many infidelities. Americans were obsessed by the Loud family. Watching the series today, it is still difficult to look away from this privileged Californian family. After the airing on PBS, the Loud family was never the same. They hated the limelight and public criticism but after that faded were always trying to get back to the time before the film. The family was damaged in a permanent way. My fear was to create the same controversy and damage to my subjects.

For this film, I was not willing to take the ethical risk with anyone but myself.

### **Sebastian**

Sebastian, my father's partner, and I had decided that we would shoot his interview over the New Year holiday when I was in New York City. He was still living in the apartment that he shared with my father. I had interviewed Seb several times over the years- I was excited to sit down with him to do it again. On Christmas Eve, Sebastian called. He had just been diagnosed with Stage 4 lung cancer. We arranged for home hospice care. Although I could have asked, I could not bear to film him. I needed to spend as much time with him that I could. Quite frankly, I was not going to be able to handle the interview. I needed to focus on Sebastian and his needs. I knew that I had enough footage in the archives. It was time to spend our last holiday together.

On February 1, I got a phone call. Sebastian woke up calling my name. His sister put him on the phone but I could not understand what he was saying. When I hung up, I looked at my husband and knew that I had to leave at that moment. It was as if the flood gates had opened. I had perfect weather driving to NYC, even though storms were raging all around my route. There was no traffic and I even found parking in the trendy meatpacking district.

When I arrived, he was dying. He could not speak but heard my voice. I held his hand and told him that I was there. At around 10:30, we decided to sleep. I was lying on the sofa, staring out at the Empire State Building as I always had as

a child. Sebastian's sister and cousin from Nice, France were chatting on the futon. Sebastian's hospital bed was in the room. His sister was telling a story and it was then that we realized he was not breathing. After calling 911, the fire department, paramedics, and police arrived. Everyone crowded into our loft apartment talking and looking at Sebastian. All I wanted to know was if he was alive or dead. They kept reviewing the DNR order and talking amongst themselves. Finally, I screamed at them, "Is he gone?" One of the paramedics came over and told me he had. To this day, I think about that night and the loss that I felt. As I type this, I still feel the lump in my throat.

Sebastian had always been an integral character in my film. Like most children in a parental relationship, I took for granted. My father had died 20 plus years prior and Seb was one of the constants in my life. His death jarred me. Instead of being one of the subjects relatives, he became a focal point in the film. Prior to his death, Sebastian was going to compliment my story. After I lost him and the pain of people not understanding our relationship, it made me rethink his role in this piece.

Life ebbs and flows. One important chapter in my life ended. No one could understand that I lost a parent when Sebastian died. If you hear that someone lost an uncle, father, aunt, grand parent- you understand the relationship. When describing Sebastian, if I called him my father's partner, people assumed business. If I called him my outlaw, it made people assume that I was joking and minimizing our relationship. Losing Sebastian was a deep emotional loss for me

and I knew my film could help others understand what our relationship meant. Through telling our story, I could keep a part of my life valid and tangible.

### **New Approach**

As a filmmaker, you are constantly struggling with where you are in your picture. As a director, you bring your experiences and knowledge to the actors or subjects to get your desired response. As an editor, you struggle with subjects and how they are portrayed. My thesis film had taken a turn. In its original inception, my voice would always have been present but in a much more subtle way. It would lie in the shots, angles, frame composition, nuances within the interviews and film structure. Now, the film approach was changing and my role as subject was becoming equally as present as director. When you enter yourself into the film frame, as subject, it changes the project.

While working as a graduate assistant in the H&A Documentary course at RIT, we screened the personal film *Tarnation* by Jonathan Caouette. The film explored Mr. Caouette's experience growing up with a mentally ill mother. Utilizing home movies and video footage shot over the course of 19 years along with a personal narrative, he managed to create a film that not only exposed the horrors of living with someone with mental illness but also the isolation it fosters. While his experiences were interesting, his approach was so narcissistic that it isolated me as a viewer. The film manipulated its audience to feel the same way the director did.

My challenge was to create a film that was personal without isolating my audience. The story I wanted to tell was tough but hopeful. The way into my story would have to emphasize family, not the nuclear family, but American families that may not fit into a preconceived mold. When I speak about my family and background, people seem to always be fascinated by it. Being raised by parents and step parents that love you is the best case scenario- regardless of sexual orientation. Once I began to think about family, the flood gates opened up. Latino, Native American, Indian- American (from India), Asian, Puerto Rican- all of these cultures embrace families in different unique American ways. Why would my family's story be any different?

After choosing to make this piece a personal documentary, I did not want to have a piece that mirrored *Tarnation*. In order to avoid isolating my audience, I decided to create a voice over that had a sense of poetry and reflection. First, I pulled journal entries that documented my relationship with Sebastian. I created a board that mapped the timeline and key players of my family, creating and finding the important emotional arcs. Compiling all of the information, I distilled the story to create the voice over that guided the viewer through *The Secret Is Out*.

## **Structure**

The most obvious way to structure the subject matter in the film was chronologically. For the story to make sense and the key relationships to evolve, it was important to start at the beginning. Not to mention, the perceptions of

homosexuality in the 1980s were crucial to developing the confusion and paranoia that followed.

One key piece was still missing...the family in 2009. I could tell my story and show the chronological changes from 1980 to 1990 to 2000 to 2010. How would I be able to portray a family, when no one would go on record? I found three teenagers and one 'tween that were willing to talk about perceptions of family through their eyes. Parents were agreeable to it. My goal was to work in gay families, perceptions, and thoughts through my interview questions. Building a rapport with the subject was easy and they warmed up after about 10 minutes into the interview. All in all, the interviews were a success.

As I began to integrate the interviews into my film, something was gnawing at me. I have always been irritated by people who say they can tell if someone is homosexual by looking at them. Homosexuality is not necessarily something you wear on your sleeve. There are gay people in all genders, races, economical backgrounds and countries. What does being gay look like? Outside of the stereotypes, how can you tell?

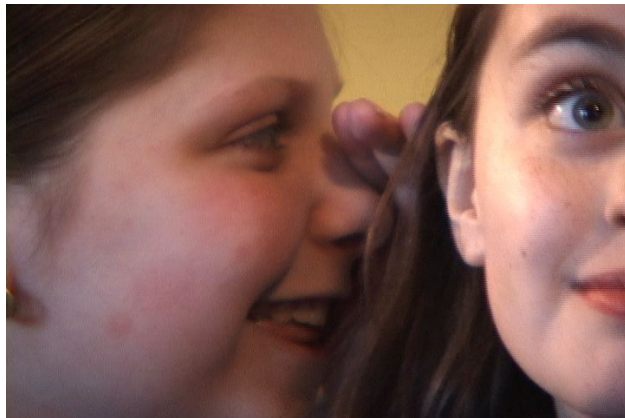
On that similar note, how can you tell that a child is being raised by gay parents? Within my thesis film, I wanted the viewer to guess and question what a gay family looks like. Through interviewing pretty, wholesome, typically American youth interview subjects who do not seem any different from each other, the viewer would have not idea who was the child of a gay parent. If the viewer could not tell which child had a gay parent, maybe they would reconsider differentiating these families at all.

By combining chronology of the story, interviews from key characters, and a poetic voice to differentiate my personal thoughts and story, I developed the structure. In moments when the viewer would need a break, I would refer back to imagery of whispering or curious eyes. This would tie the viewer back to the subject matter of the ‘secret’ and the childhood struggle.

### **Imagery**

When I am in process of making a film, the first thing that happens is that I dream about the images. Once images begin to take form in my subconscious and consciousness, the story continues to develop. One of my toughest challenges when making a film is to give myself permission to focus and explore images free of preconceived notions.

The first image that I wanted to include was the close up of the little girls whispering. Little girls can be wonderful and terrible monsters. Most women that I have encountered, regardless of how popular, have clear recollections of the image of girls whispering to each other. It is like a right of passage to pre-adolescence.



(Appendix B)

The whispering was important on many levels. Not only was it there to depict children but also to depict the entire idea of a secret. Titling the film, *The Secret Is Out*, was not accident. The placement and use of this image was meant to draw the viewer deeper into this special family.

Once I reveal the story about standing in line in elementary school, the whispering imagery is replaced by images of a young girl's eyes looking directly into the camera. The eyes are all knowing and questioning at the same time. By looking directly into the audience, they become a mechanism to visually ask the audience (society) questions.



(Appendix C)

Last, my favorite image was that of the texture of the blanket. After anything emotionally exhausting, I love to snuggle in bed. I love to look at how light travels through the weave and imperfections of the blanket. This is



something that I have done since childhood and wanted to include in the reminiscence part of the voice over.



(Appendix D)

All of the images utilized within *The Secret Is Out* were deliberate and crucial to creating the reality within the film.

## **Sound**

An important vehicle to help move the viewer through this film was sound. Music has always been important to me. There are certain songs that can take me back to key moments within my life. I wanted to sound to resonate with emotion in the film. Immediately, my thoughts went to Moby.

While studying at Purchase College for my BFA in film, I met Moby through a good childhood friend. At that time, he was just releasing his first album and touring. It was way before the great commercial success of *Play*,

which was released in 1998. When contacting him, I was unsure that he would remember me but indeed he did. He referred me to his mobygratis site and explained that I would be able to acquire limited non commercial releases for all of the music (limited means that it can be screened at film festivals, conferences, and anything that is non broadcast). After sifting through pages and pages of music, I found three pieces that would become the backbone of the film.

The other two pieces of music were *Planet Claire* by the B-52's and *Der Kommissar* by Falco. Upon writing to the B-52's and Falco's estate, they also agreed to a noncommercial release. My husband also composed a piano piece for the film, which set the tone as he played it for me throughout the writing, shooting, and cutting process.

## **Editing**

In a film edit, all of the elements must synergistically come together to create movement and timing within the piece. When editing the segment on the 1990s, these connections clearly began to happen. I would cut each image on the down beat of the music, which not only created momentum but also stylized emphasis on the sound. Movement within the frame, similarities surrounding the subject matter all fell into place.

*The Secret Is Out* had many moments that were packed with emotion. It became very important to balance the emotion with humor to prevent losing the audience. After all, even though many sad things have happened, I am hopeful that change is coming. I wanted the film to embrace a hopeful final note.

## **Filmmaker As Subject**

When you construct a film where you are both director and subject, finding balance can be very tricky. As a writer, I approached the story of my life like a narrative film. There were many key and important parts but in the end, they did not directly affect the subject at hand.

My father, who traveled the world rebuilding third world nations, was just a whiff in the film. I did not delve deeply into his life, which was interesting but not necessarily relevant to the topic of living with a gay parent, because it would take focus away from the topic at hand. The same is true of Sebastian. His story is as incredible as my father's but not as relevant to our relationship which the film explored.

When making any documentary film, it is always difficult to find your ending. Life continues on after filming ends. At what point do you decide to stop the story? Sebastian's sudden death had such an impact; it seemed the logical place to end the story of my family. I do not have the answers for what comes next. Does anyone?

Personally, I never felt vulnerable exposing my unique family. As more and more people backed out of the project, the urgency to get my story out there was more and more a driving force. Fortunately, my family supports this film and there was not any dissension about subject matter.

## **Conclusion**

*The Secret Is Out* is an important film. On a whole, this piece depicts the beauty of a unique family, its triumphs and tribulations, and continues to ask the question “Is the Secret Out?” Much to my surprise, I found that, contrary to my initial thought, the secret is not out. Families with a gay parent are not open to exposing their stories, exposing themselves, in our media driven culture. The urgency of the story Maybe someday, this film can be made with other persons coming forward to discuss the beauty of their unique family.

Until that day arrives, I am proud to have created a film that honors the beauty of my family and the beauty of love.

**First Draft- Working Script for *The Secret Is Out***

**Jane Productions presents**

**The Secret is Out**

**ACT I: The 1980's.**

I have always been Daddy's little girl. When they married, my mom was 18. My dad 19. I remembering singing Knickknack paddy whack or seeing how the clouds look like cotton candy.

The 1980s was a strange time. The president was once an actor. Supercomputers filled a room. Video games replaced the pinball machine.

It was also a time of paranoia. The Cold War. Russia was our enemy with a constant threat of nuclear war. The sexual revolution ended. People thought you could catch AIDS by shaking someone's hand or if you knew any gay men.

The nuclear family dissolved. Divorce was the new trend. Women entered the work force en masse. Latchkey kids raised themselves on Sesame Street and General Hospital.

**ACT II: Family**

When I was 6, my parents divorced. My father moved to New York City. My mom stayed put. I did not understand why. They both made sure I knew I was loved.

New York City was so exciting. There were films, Broadway shows, art museums and operas.

Close up of whispering..fade to black

Home movies, camping, waving at camera, stills, cloud footage

**MONTAGE**

Images of Pong and Atari console.  
Images of Ronald Reagan  
Computers the size of a room  
Rubber up for safety stuff

Berlin wall

Silence= Death sticker

AIDS Quilt patch (parts not entirety)

Images of Dad and Mom

Times Square cab footage driving.

Images of Seb, Dad and I in NYC

My dad, his roommate Sebastian and I took the town by force. Exploring all there was to offer.

### **ACT III: Gay Dad**

When I was 10, my father sat me down at the dining room table. He explained to me he was gay. I thought it was like bosom buddies the TV show. I cried. I did not know what that meant but I knew I could not tell anyone.

### **ACT IV: Whispers**

After a couple of months, I had to tell someone. My secret weighed me down. So I told my best friend Katie. I remember standing in line a few days later. All of the children were whispering. I knew that they knew. I couldn't watch. My stomach fell through my feet.

It was at that moment... I knew that I had to accept the reality and ignore what every one was saying. My dad was gay.

### **ACT V: Time Machine**

Through the 1990's where we began to understand more about HIV...it wasn't just a gay disease. The Berlin Wall fell.

People were coming out of the closet right and left- Ellen DeGeneres came out on national television. Will &

Circling the table red flowers in a vase

Close up small hands over ears, telephone game. Person cut on final child who smiles and puts her hand over mouth.

Montage of 1990 footage

Grace featured openly gay men in the main and supporting roles. Politicians, actors, writers, painters-being out and proud became more accepted.

Today being gay is more openly discussed. The movement has made great strides to teach diversity and kindness about all sexual orientations.

#### **ACT VI:**

Sebastian was always a troublemaker. He loved to march, protest, fight for equal rights. He was at Stonewall Riots in 1969 in the Village. He and my father marched on Washington for gay rights, no nukes, freedom for all.

I love Sebe. It is so tough to explain who he is in my life. He is not my step-father...my mom remarried and I have one. He is not my step-mother, he is a man. After much deliberation, we decided that Seb was my outlaw and I his daughter. His only child.

#### **ACT VII:**

Meet Sydney.

Images of Seb protesting  
Talking about Stone wall  
March on Washington  
Fallout shelter umbrellas  
Images of Seb and I in NYC

Interview footage will weave through voice over story.  
Sydney gay experience and economy  
Jenna bullying  
Tyler- injustice and unfairness  
Jack report on same sex couples and taxes

Meet Jack.

Meet Jenna.

Meet Tyler.

### **ACT VIII: Family**

Family. The dictionary has twenty different variations of their definitions of family. Who is your family?

Is it who lives in your house? What if you are between two houses? Is people? Is it a place?

Family.

I have pictures of camping as a child. In it are my stepfather bill, my mom, my dad, and Sebastian, and I am laying along their feet. That is my family and each one of them accepts me equally.

### **ACT IX: Gay families**

That moment in school, where I watched them whisper...they were not talking about me. My friend had kept my secret.

Can you point out a gay family? Are there telltale signs to show a same sex family? One of the children in this film comes from a same sex family. Do you know who?

My original goal for this film was to interview an entire same sex family. I traveled all along the Eastern seaboard attempting to get someone

Images of camping with mom & Bill. Dad & Seb

Images of whispering, slow motion

Fade in to ashes falling into water lily and alcove shots

Driving on road footage, lines on pavement, trees, light falling

Setting up camera, talking to people

Whispering...final hand to mouth



to go on record. I thought it would be easy...the secret was out, right?

Fifteen families in a three-year period backed out with multiple excuses but the underlying main reason was fear. Of exposure. Of the spotlight. Of being out. Like a ten year in the school yard

### **ACT X: Seb's death**

Last year, I lost Sebastian to cancer. I already lost my father to AIDS twenty years before. It was the end of an era. Our apartment in the West Village. Our protests seemed to quiet down. On the day he died, he called for me. And I was at his side when he passed.

The pain of losing Sebastian was equal to a parent and I wish I had a word greater than outlaw. No matter how much you prepare, you are never really ready.

I threw his ashes in a secluded alcove with water lilies all around. He was like that lily- gentle and loving and able to survive the harshest climates.

### **ACT XI: Conclusions**

Think about your family. What does that image look like?

As a society, can we judge what family or marriage means? Divorce rates at an all time high.

Images of Seb and I throughout 30 years pulsing like a heart beat. Slowing down to the final half beat and end on photo at my wedding

Fade to black

Fade into 1,000 Island water flowing

Images of dust falling into water with water lilies all around

Parents hugging subjects

Home movies

Images of Elijah hugging mom  
Gavin as a baby with fat hands smiling

Light shining through sheets  
Close up of parent reading book  
Image petting Quinn  
Pictures from Christmas Apartment

Jenna with hand over mouth smiling

If a family is together out of love and respect- does the sexual preference of the adults really matter?

When I think of home I think of the smell of clean sheets on my bed. My mother's voice reading stories. Petting the family dog. And Dad, Seb, and I laughing and dancing in our apartment in Greenwich Village.

The secret is out....isn't it?

**RUN CREDITS**

**ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION  
GRADUATE THESIS PROPOSAL**

**DATE:** APRIL 28, 2006

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**PROPOSED BY:** SARAH M. O'BRIEN

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**WORKING TITLE:** *THE SECRET IS OUT*    **GENRE:**

DOCUMENTARY

**LENGTH:** 28 MINUTES

**FORMAT:** DIGITAL

VIDEO

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CATHLEEN ASHWORTH, Thesis Chair

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ARNIE SIRLIN, Thesis Committee

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NAOMI ORWIN, Thesis Committee

### ***The Secret is Out* synopsis**

*The Secret is Out* will explore the question whether or not same sex parenting places the child at a disadvantage. The film will follow two same sex families, focusing on the child and how he/she relates to his or her home environment and the world around them.

This film will be shot on digital video. It will be 28 minutes long.

My approach to this film will be in the spirit of interactive documentary. I envision the camera connecting with the subjects, following them through their lives. As director, I will be present as an off camera voice through the interview process. Since interviewing can be problematic, particularly with children, I think this approach will help with the continuity of answers.

I have always appreciated the cinema verite approach to documentary, particularly as seen in *Chronicle of A Summer*. The camera becomes a character with the subjects. Boundaries are explored.

The pauses and awkwardness of an interview is very important. It allows us to see the humanity of our subjects. In this film, the subjects are children and gay parents. I want to explore their stories and see if I can capture the beauty and uniqueness of these special families.

#### **SUMMARY:**

Thesis Question: Does same sex parenting place the child at a disadvantage?

Genre: Documentary

Length: 28 minutes

Media: Digital video

## ***The Secret Is Out Treatment***

What defines a family? Is it a husband and wife? Is it a domestic group of people linked by kinship? Is it a stepfamily? Is it a same sex family? Close your eyes. Picture your family. Who do you see?

Same sex marriage and child rearing has been in the media forefront of late. The debate is ongoing. One side feels that with federal recognition of the union, it would make their families stronger and protect their rights. The opposite side feels that not only is it eroding family values but that it is also allowing couples to raise children in a harmful environment.

In April 2004, The Harris Poll conducted a survey (The Harris Poll #26) about adoption by same sex couples. The results found that 43% of Americans disapprove of a female couple adopting and 45% disapproved of male couples adopting. What is most interesting about these findings is that since 1996, the disapproval rate has decreased from 61% to 43% for women and from 65% to 45% for men. Why are our attitudes changing?

In July of 2004, The American Psychological Association found that there was no scientific basis to conclude that same sex parents were unfit because of their sexual orientation. Again, what is it that is causing attitudes to change?

Information is the key to changing opinions. With same sex parenting more visible, people are recognizing these families. Even the New York Times newspaper includes same sex unions within their weddings section. My film will focus on these unique same sex families, first hand; to explore what is really happening to these children.

Meet Gavin Smith. Like most twelve year olds, Gavin loves to play baseball, attend Boy Scout meetings, and play Harry Potter with his friends. He is smart

and intuitive. Looking in from the outside, Gavin appears as a typical twelve-year old. He is typical, except for when you ask him about his parents. Ask him. He will tell you proudly and with love in his eyes, Gavin has two mothers.

After three years of serious dating, Beth and Kathy realized that they wanted a family of their own. Kathy muses that there was so much love in their life that they needed to share it with a child. That is when Beth became inseminated. Nine months later, Gavin was born. Beth and Kathy are the only parents that Gavin has ever known.

*The Secret is Out* will accompany Gavin through his life- baseball practice, playing with his friends, interacting at school. As we follow him, questions about same sex parenting will be answered. How does Gavin explain his mothers' relationship to his friends? Is it awkward? Are his teachers wary about addressing or discussing his mothers at school? What does Gavin call his mommies? Is he sad that he does not have an active father?

Since Kathy and Beth are essential to Gavin's world, they will be an important part of our exploration of this family. Their perspective on Gavin's experience is crucial. What are their main challenges? How do they address adversity?

Meet Megan Green. Like most six-year olds, Megan likes to go to Brownies, play dolls, and someday hopes to become a fairy tale princess. Meet Hal and Kent. They are Megan's parents.

Hal and Kent knew they wanted a family. After six years as foster parents, they were finally approved for adoption. That is when Megan arrived. She was two years old. Like the Smith Family, Megan, Hal and Kent, face many issues. What are the differences in their challenges as men raising a young girl? What were the issues they had through the adoption process? How do they handle Megan's

questions about Mommy? Are other parents standoffish about allowing play dates with same sex parents?

How does Megan feel about her daddies? Does she feel different from other kids who have a mommy and daddy? How does she process her family environment?

The Green and Smith families will be the main focus in *The Secret Is Out*. My investigation will lead us through their family routines such as dinner, car-pooling, and extended family gatherings. Visually, I see Hal and Kent taking Megan to the zoo and playground. I picture Kathy and Beth bike riding and playing basketball with Gavin. The day-to-day routines complimented by the unique nature of their family unit will create interesting juxtapositions.

In the spirit of the exploration of the Green and Smith families, I will interview Megan and Gavin's friends, grandparents, and teachers. To add more depth and scope, I also envision brief interviews with other children (multiple age groups represented) of same sex parents focusing on their opinions.

The right to have a family is a fundamental instinct we have as humans. The definition of what makes a family is changing. *The Secret is Out* will capture the struggles and love that go into making the nontraditional same sex families work.

**Title: The Secret Is Out**  
**Length: 28 minutes**  
**Format: Digital Video**

**Producer/Director: Sarah M. O'Brien**  
**Shooting Ratio: 10 to 1**

### BUDGET

<b>Preproduction</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Total Cost</b>
	Research supplies			\$40.00
	Digital Voice recorder			\$50.00
	Digital Memory card			\$75.00
	Books			\$25.00
	Gas Mileage	100 miles	.40 per mile	\$40.00
	<b>TOTAL</b>			\$230.00

<b>Production</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Total Cost</b>
	DVCAM Tape- 64 min	3 cases	\$82.00	\$246.00
	DAT tape	5	\$25.00	\$50.00
	Wireless Lavalier Mic.	1	\$1,000.00	\$1,000.00
	Tripod	1	\$400.00	\$400.00
	Travel			\$300.00
	Hard Drive	1	\$250.00	\$250.00
	<b>TOTAL</b>			\$2,246.00

<b>Post Production</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Total Cost</b>
	Final Cut Studio 5.1	1	\$700.00	\$700.00
	DV Tape	1 case	\$82.00	\$82.00
	DVD-R	100	\$0.50	\$50.00
	DVD cases	100	\$0.50	\$50.00
	Printing case covers	100	\$1.50	\$150.00
	Festival fees			\$500.00
	<b>TOTAL</b>			\$1,538.00

### SUMMARY OF COST

Subtotal	\$4,014.00
10% contingency	\$401.14
<b>TOTAL COST</b>	<b>\$4,415.00</b>



**"The Secret is Out" Production Timeline**  
**Sarah M. O'Brien**

**Preproduction**

<b>What</b>	<b>When</b>
Thesis proposal accepted	April/May 2006
Complete all research findings	May 2006
Develop interview questions	May 2006
Interview any new candidates	May/ June 2006
Select final candidates	May/ June 2006

**Production**

<b>What</b>	<b>When</b>
Begin photography	June/July 2006
Conduct family interviews	July 2006
Conduct friend interviews	Mid- August 2006
Children interviews	End of August 2006
Location shoots (NYC or WA DC)	TBD
Follow family through schooling	September 2006
Address any shooting challenges	September/October 2006
Complete photography	October/November 2006

**Post Production**

<b>What</b>	<b>When</b>
Capture DV tape	November 2006
Pick selects from footage	November/December 2006
Assemble selects	December/ January 2007
Determine sequences/structure	January 2007
Voice over/ sound recording	January/February 2007
Rough Cut editing	February 2007
Soundtrack development	February 2007
Review rough cut	End of February 2007
Create/ animate titles	March 2007
Fine cut	April 2007
Review with thesis committee	Ongoing
Screen thesis film publicly	Early May 2007

#### **IV. Appendix**

A: The Secret Is Out. Sarah O'Brien. Still image from frame 4:22. 2011

B: The Secret Is Out. Sarah O'Brien. Still Image from frame :04. 2011

C: The Secret Is Out. Sarah O'Brien. Still image from frame 17:10. 2011

D: The Secret Is Out. Sarah O'Brien. Still image from frame 16:55. 2011