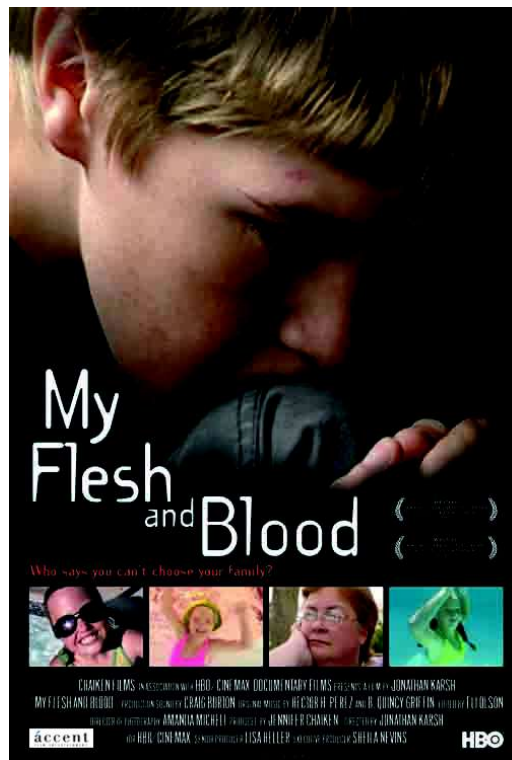


Accent Film Entertainment Presents



MY FLESH AND BLOOD

A film by Jonathan Karsh



Running Time: 84 minutes
Rating (TBA)

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Cremorne Orpheum – Military Road

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director's statement

When you walk into the Tom house, you're immediately greeted by gregarious children who compete for your attention. They are disabled, all of them, but soon you don't notice. The burns are gone when Faith begins singing. Xenia does pull-ups and you forget she has no legs.

When I first met the Tom family, I had this overwhelming curiosity about Susan Tom. How does she do it? Why does she do it? As we began to shoot the documentary I discovered those questions are easy to answer, but larger questions remained: how do you raise a child with both physical and mental illness? How do these eleven children handle teasing at school? How do they approach the issue of dating? What will happen when they eventually grow up and leave this comforting family? As two of them fight for their lives, how do the Tom kids come to understand death?

I've worked as a television journalist for over a decade, and in that time I have never found a story more worthy of a documentary film. As a student of verité films, I knew I had a story here that could be told without voice over narration, with little music, with none of the devices used in mainstream television. Here, I could create a powerful portrait of a family simply by being a fly on the wall, and I'm so thankful we've done it. This is a story following a woman with tremendous heart and conviction, but caught in a year of her life that threatens the foundation of her family. Joe, her troubled teenage son, was prepared to act on his darkest impulses against his mother and his siblings. His physical and mental illness raised important questions I never set out to answer.

film credits

Director	JONATHAN KARSH
Producer	JENNIFER CHAIKEN
Director of Photography	AMANDA MICHELI
Editor	ELI OLSON
Composers	B. QUINCY GRIFFIN HECTOR PÉREZ
Production Sound	CRAIG BURTON
Additional Camera	JIGAR MEHTA GILBERT RIOS
Additional Production Sound	MONROE CUMMINGS MATTY NEMATOLLAHI
Supervising Sound Editor/Sound Designer	ANDREA GARD
Sound Editor and Re-Recording Mixer	LORA HIRSCHBERG / BISON BISON SF
Post Production Services	SKYWALKER SOUND A DIVISION OF LUCAS DIGITAL LIMITED
Magic Bullet Services	THE ORPHANAGE
Magic Bullet Colorist	AARON RHODES
Magic Bullet Producer	YVETTE MEMORY
Digital Effects Artist	KRISTI VALK
Orphanage Post Executive	MARC SADEGHI
Title Design	MATT SILVERMAN / PHOENIX DESIGN & EFFECTS
Motion Control Camera	JONATHAN VARGO / VIDEO ARTS
 <i>For Chaiken Films:</i>	
Associate Producers	JASON BLALOCK ELIZABETH O'BRIEN JONAS WOOLVERTON
Production Assistant	LAURYN SIEGEL
Interns	JOANNE HUSAR EMMA SONDUCK
Participants	SUSAN TOM JOE TOM CHLOE TOM ANTHONY TOM XENIA TOM LIBBY TOM FAITH TOM HANNAH TOM MARGARET TOM JEREMY TOM BEN TOM EMILY TOM SUSIE TOM JEFF FORSMAN DOROTHY LOOMER RANDY HUDSON TAMMY HUDSON ELLIOT VICHINSKY BOB WAGNER
 <i>For HBO/Cinemax Documentary Films:</i>	
Senior Producer	LISA HELLER Executive Producer Shelia Nevins

s y n o p s i s

MY FLESH AND BLOOD is a feature length verité documentary about the Tom family - eleven special needs children adopted by Fairfield, California mother Susan Tom - and the story of Susan's battle with her emotionally disturbed teenage son. With limited help from the state, Susan cares for a bustling and often chaotic house of children with conditions ranging from genetic skin disease to missing limbs. Encouraged by Susan to feel a sense of self-acceptance, most of the children thrive despite their disabilities. But Susan's limits are tested when her enraged 15 year-old son threatens to kill one of his siblings. And when one child unexpectedly dies, the Tom family must come to understand death at an early age. MY FLESH AND BLOOD follows the Tom family in what turns out to be the most tumultuous year of their lives.

production notes

Inspired by a short television piece he produced while hosting the Bay Area television show EVENING MAGAZINE, Jonathan Karsh felt that the Tom Family warranted a feature length film. Partnering up in June of 2001 with producer Jennifer Chaiken, Karsh hit the road with his three-person crew for six weeks to join the Tom Family on their summer road trip across the country. While little of this footage actually ended up in the final film, the trip served to create an intimate bond between crew and subjects that cannot be underestimated. Viewers often ask Karsh about the incredible access he was allowed as a filmmaker, and he immediately attributes it to the summer he and the family “lived” together on the road.

Susan Tom gave our production one year to film in her home in Fairfield, California. That was it. If we didn't get what we needed, then we were out of luck. But in that year, she gave us complete access to every moment unfolding inside her house. She only had three rules: no bathroom shots of her, no bathing suit shots of her, and no one could tell us to stop rolling except for her. The first two rules were easy to follow, but the last one proved to be challenging when one of the children, Joe, became extremely hostile towards the crew.

We are often asked how we dealt with shooting around such a large number of kids. Initially we played a game - "we're here" or "we're not here". When Jonathan told them "we're here", he would laugh and joke with them. When he said, "we're not here", they quickly came to understand that the crew was “invisible” and would just ignore them. Then after a while, they took a cue from the boom microphone - if it was down, they knew they could play around. If it was up, they knew the camera was rolling.

With the family living within close proximity to the production company base in San Francisco, we were afforded the incredible advantage of being able to pick-up day shoots here and there, rather than having to rely upon a pre-determined shooting schedule. Jonathan was in daily contact with Susan, inquiring about any and all events going on with each child. Additionally, Susan played a key role, as she was savvy as to what a filmmaker might want to know about, and would call to let us know if something worth filming was taking place.

Both Susan and Jonathan felt a certain “kismet” about the year we happened to document their lives. It was a time when the family was in crisis, when Susan was trying to maintain a happy household in the face of threats from one son, and the failing health of another. Having a documentary crew present during the toughest moments, dissecting every situation and comment, she says, was “like a free year of therapy.”

Shooting progressed for one year, with principal photography wrapping in June of 2002. Editing began in February 2002, and the film was completed in January 2003.

production credits

jonathan karsh **director**

MY FLESH AND BLOOD marks Jonathan Karsh's debut as a feature documentary director. He first met the Tom Family during the three years he spent as a host and writer for "Evening Magazine" on KPIX TV; the CBS affiliate station in San Francisco. While at CBS, Karsh won three consecutive Emmy Awards for his work on the show. It was the life-changing experience of meeting the Toms that led him to quit his job and pursue making this film full-time. Previously he has also hosted shows for ABC News, The Discovery Channel and CNET Television. For four years, Karsh honed his writing and interviewing skills as a national correspondent for the news magazine show "American Journal". Most recently Karsh has been commissioned by MTV, AMC, and National Geographic to direct segments for their original documentary series.

jennifer chaiken **producer**

Jennifer Chaiken has produced several documentary and narrative films. She most recently completed MY FLESH AND BLOOD, winner of both the Audience Award and Best Director Award at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival, and scheduled to air on HBO/Cinemax in 2004. Prior to MY FLESH AND BLOOD, she produced BIG EDEN, winner of over 15 Audience Awards, and touted as one the top 50 DVDs of all time by the San Francisco Chronicle. Chaiken also produced the highly rated HBO "America Undercover" documentary NAKED STATES. Her past producing credits include: RESTAURANT, starring Adrien Brody, Simon Baker, and Lauryn Hill; I LOVE YOU, DON'T TOUCH ME!, premiering at Sundance and distributed by MGM; and FAMILY NAME, winner of the Freedom of Expression Award at Sundance and nominated for an Emmy after its broadcast on the acclaimed "POV" series on PBS.

amanda micheli **director of photography**

Amanda Micheli is an award-winning filmmaker with experience shooting both documentary and narrative films. JUST FOR THE RIDE, directed, shot and edited by Micheli, won a Student Academy Award and premiered on the PBS series "POV". Since then she has shot an award-winning PBS film in Cambodia (THE FLUTE PLAYER), and a film in Ghana (WITCHES IN EXILE) scheduled for release in 2004. She is also finishing her own film, DOUBLE DARE, which was one of three films to be selected for the prestigious Sundance Instituted Documentary Lab. Other production credits include: SAME RIVER TWICE (Sundance 2003), YOU'RE GONNA MISS ME (in post), and the PBS/ITVS series AMERICAN GIRLS.

eli olson **editor**

While MY FLESH AND BLOOD is her first foray into feature documentary editing, Eli Olson is a veteran editor of numerous television and commercial projects. Her visual style can be seen on HBO's SEX IN THE NINETIES, the San Francisco Academy of Science's acclaimed documentary EARTHQUAKES, and a variety of commercial and corporate work for VH1, Sony, Turner and Showtime among others.

character descriptions

susan tom (53 years old) is a divorced single mother who leads the extraordinary Tom clan. With a razor sharp wit and a doctor's knowledge of medicine, she raises her kids to be self-confident adults. Susan gave birth to two boys, and proceeded to adopt 11 children with various special needs. While developing a close relationship with her own children, ironically Susan has been estranged from her own mother for years.

anthony tom (19 years old) is described by his sisters as "the heart of the Tom family." He is gentle and loving, and suffers from a degenerative skin disease called E.B. (Epidermolysis Bullosa). People afflicted with this extremely rare disease do not produce enough collagen in their bodies, causing their skin to blister and fall off with the slightest touch. As with most E.B. patients, Anthony has developed cancer that has ravaged his body, and is not a candidate for treatment.

margaret tom (18 years old) was born in Korea and survived a childhood bout with Epilepsy. As second-in-command in the Tom family, she is the one that Susan depends on for relief. Even as an around-the-clock caregiver for her siblings, Margaret also works part-time at the local grocery store and attends community college classes. She is at a crossroads in her life, torn between her responsibilities at home and her desire to get an education and move out on her own.

joe tom (15 years old) is unanimously considered the black sheep of the Tom family. He has Cystic Fibrosis (CF), Diabetes, and Attention Deficit Disorder with hyperactivity. In and out of Oakland's Children's Hospital for neglecting his CF treatments, and regularly admitted to mental hospitals for psychotic episodes, Joe demands a great amount of attention during the rare times when he is home. Feeling abandoned by his birth mother's move to Oregon, Joe turns his anger on his adoptive family.

xenia tom (13 years old) is from Chita, Russia and was born without legs. Bursting with confidence, Xenia participates in regular P.E. classes at her school and holds the record for pull-ups (an impressive fifty). Fashion-conscious and a lover of shoes (for her hands), Xenia is a happy-go-lucky teenager who dates Jeff, one of the most popular boys in school.

faith tom (8 years old) is the youngest Tom child. At four months, she was severely burned in a crib fire. The fire burned her face and back, her right hand was lost, and she has permanent sores on her head that won't heal. Faith is highly intelligent; an avid reader whose test scores far exceed her classmates. She is ruthlessly teased at school, and she defends herself by physically hurting other children, a behavior that has cost her the opportunity to skip grades. Now Susan is weighing the difficult decision of whether to home school Faith, or watch her fight her way through adolescence.

film summary

An adoptive mother to eleven special needs children, Susan Tom is both a saint and an ordinary woman. *MY FLESH AND BLOOD* captures Susan and her family in what turns about to be the most tumultuous year of their lives. The film opens with 15 year-old Joe Tom's angry declaration that he might end up killing one of his sisters. Susan's fractious relationship with her most emotionally troubled child forms a thread that weaves through the rest of the film.

Susan introduces us to her adoptive brood. Highlighted in the film are Faith, a cheerful eight year-old girl who was severely burned in a crib fire as an infant; Xenia, a boy crazy 13 year-old born without legs; Anthony, a 19 year-old born with the degenerative skin disease Epidermolysis Bullosa (E.B.), and Margaret, an 18 year-old who has outgrown her disabilities and come to be second-in-command as her siblings caregiver.

"I'd like to do a better job this time," Susan reveals in the face of Anthony's diagnosis of cancer. A few years ago, her daughter Susie died from this same disease. We see Anthony's stoic expression as his mother unwraps his bandages to bathe his weeping sores in bleach and water, an experience she likens to being dragged by a car down a gravel road. "I can't see anything worse than E.B.," states Susan. Yet somehow, Anthony peacefully accepts his condition.

But the film quickly punctures stereotypical portraits of disabled children as victims. In a startlingly funny scene, the children go out on Halloween night trick-or-treating with an outrageous sense of humor. We see Xenia, born without legs, screaming with laughter as she is "sawn in half". Through the rest of the film, dream-like interludes of the kids at play directly contrast the gritty domestic drama that ensues.

Susan explains how she came to adopt her children. In the 1970s, living with her husband Phil in Northern California, she gave birth to two sons, Jeremy and Ben. But she still longed for a daughter. After adopting two special needs girls, Emily and Margaret, the strain of the additional children pushed her already troubled marriage to a breaking point. Susan and Phil divorced, yet she continued adopting more children. As Susan explains, from cooking and cleaning for five, it was not such a leap to go from six to twelve and

finally to thirteen. Her mother suggests that while born with a caring nature, the kids fill a “void of loneliness” that Susan has experienced since her own childhood.

Now seriously overweight, Susan admits to not having a single date in 22 years. Reviewing lonely-hearts profiles online, she decides she has no time for a love life, as she doesn't want to have to take care of another person.

Reunited with his drug-addicted birth mother at her fourth wedding, Joe is desperate to bond with his mother and new stepfather. He immediately begins calling them “Mom” and “Dad”, as Susan calmly watches on. Having never been a constant in Joe's life, his birth mom disappoints him once again as she tells him she's moving away shortly after their reunion. This sends the story into a tailspin as Joe turns his anger on his adoptive family, unable to reconcile the betrayal he feels.

Indefatigable, Susan's limits are tested when Joe crosses the line. She learns that Joe may have attempted to sexually abuse his developmentally disabled 13 year-old sister, Katie. And when he screams out “legless bitch!” and “no-legged whore!” to another sister, Susan summons a social worker to take him away for the night in order to safeguard her other children. In this same explosive evening, Margaret breaks down after years of little acknowledgment for her vital role in the family, torn about her desire to move out. Joe does return, though the family is less than thrilled to have him back.

Ignoring his treatments, Joe's Cystic Fibrosis begins to worsen and his anger resurfaces. “When I grow up and move away I'm never gonna speak to my sisters again,” he warns, “and if I don't move away I'm gonna end up killing one of them.” When Joe does leave the family, it is through his own death, rather than his sisters'. Joe's untimely passing causes Susan to ponder the meaning of her son's anger in a different light. “I think he pushed us away because he didn't want to say goodbye,” she says. Attachment was too painful. Anxious about Anthony's reaction to Joe's death, the family wonders if Anthony might worry about his own demise. But as Anthony turns 20 and the Toms celebrate his birthday, Susan chooses to affirm the full range of light and shade in the family's experience, rather than dwell on her children's mortality. “It's been an up and down year,” she says, “but we've had many up and down years. There are happy times and sad times and stressful times, but all in all it's your life, and you live it.”

critical praise

“An extraordinary portrait of a woman and her found family...
The human drama — joy, rage, sorrow, unrealistic hopes — among these
unlikely siblings blows away just about anything the festival's [Sundance]
make-believe tales can muster.”

- David Germain, WASHINGTON POST, ASSOCIATED PRESS

“At once affecting and unsentimental, Jonathan Karsh’s “My Flesh and Blood”
is a warmhearted but clear-eyed cinema-verité portrait of Susan Tom,
a spirited adoptive mother, and her extended family of eleven special needs children.”

- Joe Leydon, VARIETY

“... no family compares in dysfunction to Susan Tom's in ‘My Flesh and Blood’
... you have a family portrait that is as engrossing as it is difficult to watch.”

- Anthony Kaufman, VILLAGE VOICE

“In the [Sundance] documentary competition, first time director Jonathan Karsh
emerged as an undiscovered talent with his “My Flesh and Blood.”

- Bob Tourtellotte, REUTERS

“Jonathan Karsh is a fly on the wall, capturing the small dramas,
heartbreaking pain and joyful energy of the Tom household.”

- Sean P. Means, SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

" An unforgettable film about a single mom with 11 adopted special-needs kids,
[My Flesh and Blood] is actually about the meaning of life."

- Jennie Punter, TORONTO GLOBE AND MAIL
