

my mother's  
garden

*A FILM BY CYNTHIA LESTER*

*Directed by:*

**CYNTHIA LESTER**

*Produced by:*

**SEETHROUGH FILMS ADI AMIT ALESSANDRA DOBRIN**

*Produced by:*

**SUSANNAH LUDWIG & ELISABETH HARRIS**

*Edited By:*

**ALESSANDRA DOBRIN**

**JEREMY STULBERG**

*Additional Editing by:*

**IRA BLANCHARD**

*Cinematography by:*

**MAGELA CROSIGNANI & CYNTHIA LESTER**

*Music By:*

**T. GRIFFIN**

USA\*2007\*68 minutes\*Color\* DV\*Stereo

# my mother's garden

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**December 2007**

Filmmaker Cynthia Lester will debut her directorial feature length documentary at Slamdance Film Festival in Park City Utah this January. The film follows the life of her mother, who suffers from a severe case of hoarding disorder, and the struggles that the family faces in caring for her and maintaining any sense of normalcy.

Eugenia Lester was raised in post World War II Soviet controlled Poland by her aunt, an Auschwitz survivor. She immigrated to The United States in the 1970's with her new husband and son, but soon found herself navigating the new country alone, with her young son, who was eventually taken away in a custody battle, because of her inability to provide for him. Battling depression, she eventually started a business and began a new family. During this time her hoarding disorder began to take over and gradually pushed her three children to leave home at a very young age to fend for themselves, while she continued to clutter her home and her thoughts with useless garbage.

Director, Cynthia Lester looked to filmmaking as a teenager as a way to cope with her mother's condition. She enrolled in after school programs, studied at UCLA, and has since worked in the industry on such highly praised projects as *Riker's High*, *Annapolis*, and *The Fountain*. An experienced camerawoman, editor, and producer, her directorial debut has been a three year labor of love, driven by the desire to heal her family and create awareness about hoarding disorder.



*My Mother's Garden* was an official selection of the 2006 New York IFP Market and was a finalist for the IFP Socially Conscious Award. The film has also received grants from the 2007 New York State Council For the Arts and the Pacific Pioneer Fund.

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# *My Mother's Garden*

## SYNOPSIS



In the suburban setting of a quiet tree-lined street in Granada Hills, California we see a 61 year old woman pushing a grocery cart to her front door. We watch her climb through a window covered in ivy and cob webs into her house, stepping on top of stacks of newspapers, piles of debris, rotting material, clothing, and toys; a living mass of waste that has literally pushed her out of the house and into her garden.

*My Mother's Garden* is the story of Eugenia Lester whose hoarding disorder has entered a dangerous and life threatening stage. Directed by her daughter Cynthia, it documents how one family comes together to cope with their mother's disorder and rebuild a lost sense of family.

Through tracing Eugenia's history we learn how the past has shaped her current situation. Born in Poland during the Polish uprising of 1944 and raised by a Holocaust survivor in communist Poland, where hoarding material items was a way of life, she is overwhelmed by the excess of our consumer driven society. At its heart, *My Mother's Garden* is the story of a disjointed family helmed by a strong, intelligent woman who must undergo a deep metamorphosis to save herself from the depths of mental illness and salvage her family.

# *My Mother's Garden*

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



My personal journey through this documentary was necessary to heal the wounds of abandonment, isolation, and dependency that are often present when raised by a parent with a persistent mental illness. Though my brothers and I are now adults, we all feel a deep need for a stabilizing center for our family, a permanent place to call home. This longing for stability has caused disorder in our lives both, socially and emotionally.

Through this documentary, I am applying my experience in social work, art therapy, and filmmaking to my own family. I hope that the film can be therapeutic as well as a creative work of art that will help bring awareness to the issue of mental illness and also reach others who are sympathetic to this subject matter.

Cynthia Lester – Director

# *My Mother's Garden*

## BIOS

### **Cynthia Lester - Director**

Cynthia is the co-founder of Next Generation Productions, an organization that gives inner-city students direct mentoring experience with film professionals. Inspired by this experience, Cynthia pursued her film studies at UC Santa Cruz where she directed several short films and produced a documentary on drug and alcohol use on the UC campuses, which was used as a learning tool for residential staff nation wide. After college, Cynthia taught an art therapy program for mentally ill and recovering addicts in Brooklyn, NY. Cynthia has also worked with HBO Documentaries and such films as: "Riker's High", "Annapolis", "Elvis By The Presleys," and "The Fountain." "My Mother's Garden is her feature length directorial debut which will be completed by the end of 2007. Cynthia is also currently working with GEMS, (girls educations and mentoring services), as a supportive services coordinator helping girls on the street get a chance at a better life. [www.gems-girls.org](http://www.gems-girls.org)

### **Susannah Ludwig - Producer**

The Sundance Institute recognizing her as a visionary independent producer, named Susannah Ludwig the 2003 Mark Silverman Fellow. She is the owner/producer of Flourish Films a New York Based company that produces documentary and narrative films. Her current slate of projects includes MY MOTHER'S GARDEN, directed by Cynthia Lester, MEAT WORLD, directed by Stephanie Black and RECLINING NUDE, directed by Rebecca Dreyfus. The story of the largest unsolved art heist in American history is the subject of Ludwig's most recent documentary film, entitled STOLEN. STOLEN opened theatrically in over 50 cities and was aired as part of PBS's acclaimed Independent Lens series, in March 2007. Ms. Ludwig has been a major force in the realization of numerous critically acclaimed films including *Our Song*, directed by Jim McKay, *The Ballad of Ramblin Jack*, directed by Aiyana Elliott, *Spring Forward*, directed by Tom Gilroy and *La Ciudad*, directed by David Riker. In addition to her feature and television work, Ludwig often acts as producer on corporate videos and commercials. She is on the adjunct faculty at Long Island University where she teaches documentary film production.

### **Elisabeth Harris – Producer**

Elisabeth studied documentary film in high school, as a major at Vassar College, and for a Masters Degree at City College in New York. She has worked steadily in the industry for ten years, transitioning quickly from production assistant to associate producer for several documentaries about topics including Arafat & Sharon, 9/11, The Beatles, Elvis Presley, and Paul McCartney, which have aired on The Discovery Channel, NBC, ABC, and PBS. She has worked as an associate producer on "48 Hours" at CBS and also produced an online series called "Jericho Countdown" which has recently received a special Emmy nomination. Elisabeth produced a two-hour CBS documentary special, and best selling DVD, called "Elvis By The Presleys" and is developing several new long form projects in addition to completing "My Mother's Garden"

## **Jeremy Stulberg – Editor**

Jeremy Stulberg is an American film director and editor whose most recent film "**Off the Grid: Life on the Mesa**" premiered at the *2007 Slamdance Film Festival*, and is currently playing at film festivals throughout North America and Europe. The film recently won *The Michael Moore Award* from the Film Society of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Previously, Jeremy was the Editor and Associate Producer for "**The Education of Shelby Knox**" (PBS's **POV**), which premiered in competition at the *2005 Sundance Film Festival*. The film also won the audience award at *SXSW* and the *Full Frame Documentary Festival*. Jeremy edited the narrative feature film "**Another Gay Movie**" starring Graham Norton and Scott Thompson, released theatrically in the summer of 2006. He was also the associate editor of "**In Memoriam: New York City: 9/11/01**" (HBO), which won an Emmy for Outstanding Picture Editing for Non-Fiction Programming. Jeremy is a *2006 New York State Council on the Arts* grantee. He is a graduate of the Institute of Film and Television at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

## **T.Griffin - Composer**

T. Griffin is a composer, producer and songwriter based in Brooklyn New York. He has released four critically acclaimed CDs of songs on the Shiny Little record label, most recently *Lit By Your Phone* under the band name The Quavers. Griffin has contributed his immersive and intricate scoring to many projects, including films by Jem Cohen (*NYC Weights and Measures*), Esther B. Robinson (*A Walk into the Sea*), Peter Sillen (*Alice's House*), Michael Almercyda (*New Orleans, Mon Amour*) and Daniel Lohaus (*When I Came Home*) as well as a full score for Anne Bogart's radical staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He has also collaborated with musical luminaries such as Patti Smith, Vic Chesnutt, Tom Verlaine, members of Fugazi and godspeed you! black emperor, and The Ex. He has created live film and music events with Jem Cohen, Lance Weiler, animator Brent Green, photographer Michael Ackerman, and with Esther B. Robinson for the 60's Factory films of Danny Williams.

## **SeeThrough Films –**

**Adi Amit** – Co-founder/owner of SeeThrough Films, located in Tribeca Manhattan. Born and raised in Israel, Adi got her start producing films in her home country, including numerous productions for the Israeli Defense Forces. Adi's film, "Dead Stars" was nominated for "Best Achievement by a Female Director" by the Directors Guild of America, nominated for "Best Directed Film" at the 2001 Dusty Film Festival in NY, and was an "Official Selection" at the LA International Film Festival, the Tel Aviv International Film Festival, and the NoDance Film Festival in Utah.

**Alessandra Dobrin** – Co-Founder/owner of SeeThrough Films located in Tribeca, Manhattan, Alessandra was raised in the Netherlands and moved to new York to study film at the School of Visual Arts. Her directorial/editorial debut, a film entitled "Anduin & Lorien" received nominations in "Best Film," "Best Use of Technology" and has featured in festivals such as The Dusty Film Festival, Seaside Film Festival, International Festival of Cinema & Technology, in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris. Her most recent credits include lead editor on the CBS TV special "Elvis By The Presleys"

# ***My Mother's Garden***

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Elizabeth Nelson of the organization *Children of Hoarders* says:

*“The personal story in your film is extremely powerful and as our members are viewing the trailer, all are remarking on how much it reflects THEIR stories, too. Every one of us has felt alone and unique in our struggle with this issue UNTIL we hear the stories of others and realize how sadly common it is.”*

“My Mother’s Garden” will address outreach programming in the following capacities:

- A)** “My Mother’s Garden” is a story of hope and courage for families who have struggled with disadvantages. It is the story of an immigrant, a single mother with a serious mental disability and her four children. We are currently building liaison relationships with such organizations as women shelters, ACS, and homeless shelters.
- B)** Families that deal with Obsessive Compulsive Hoarding Disorder can see that they are not alone and can strive to support each other. We are affiliated with an organization called Children of Hoarders which will link us to these struggling individuals so we can help network with the larger community affected by this disorder. ([www.childrenofhoarders.com](http://www.childrenofhoarders.com)). Along with the National Association of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) we will develop other potential advocacy alliances for families that struggle with all mental disorders.
- C)** “My Mother’s Garden” also calls attention to the difficulties that low income and immigrant families face when trying to get competent health care in the United States. Through a partnership with The Coalition for Humane Immigrants Rights of Los Angeles and the California Immigrant Welfare Collaborative we hope to bring attention to the specific needs of immigrants resulting from situations surrounding the transition to life in America.
- D)** This film will also serve as an advocacy platform for pleading to health insurance companies to recognize this as a legitimate mental disorder which requires serious treatment, and not just anti-depressant drugs. When hoarding patients are turned away by insurance they usually have no option but to continue with life as they know it and their families continue to suffer.
- E)** Finally this film is a testament to programs that provide arts education to disenfranchised kids in the public school system. Art saved my life. When I was thirteen years old I was forced out of my mother’s house because of her condition, and I enrolled in the Pacoima Middle School film program which provided an outlet for artistic expression and gave me a chance to become a fulfilled and complete human being. I want to reach out to other at-risk teens who need this outlet to let them know that these programs are available and they have a right to be a part of it. I also want people who go to the theatre to walk away moved, educated, and aware.

## Q & A

Q. Why did you make this film?

A. I originally went into this project to seek help for my Mom's illness and get a better understanding of who she is. The camera allowed me to separate from my one emotional burden one has to overcome when you are a child of a parent with a mental illness and see my mother from a more open lens.

Q. How did Hoarding Disorder affect your family?

A. I think my Mom's mental illness made it difficult for my mom to handle the many struggles of everyday life. Her depression and emotional problems lead to lack of work and impoverished living conditions. We also had very little structure and/or proper guidelines in how to cope with every day stressors. We basically had to take care of ourselves and were easily drawn into unhealthy lifestyles.

Q. What is your relationship like with your mother and brothers?

A. We are surprisingly really close now, but not in your typical family "brady bunch" way. I think it signifies the strength and bonds families who go through hardships can have. That just because you come from a broken home does not mean that you can't be an example of a strong family.

Q. Did making the film bring you closer to your family or cause extra tension?

A. At times both. My family is used to me running around with a camera because it has been my passion since my teacher in junior high introduced me to film production. I feel it kept me closer because I made it my job to bring this family together and follow the progress for the past three years. Sometimes the camera did get in the way and I would turn it off. I went into this project telling myself, my family is the most important, documenting the crisis comes second. Also, I think my family was worried how people would react when exposing this to the world, but overall I think we are all in unison that this will hopefully raise awareness about the issue of mental illness and create healthy dialogue for people to come forward and seek help in their communities.

Q. Having been through it, what would you say to a family who was facing this crisis? What is the best way to get help?

A. Seek professional help. It's a long process, but don't give up and take baby steps. Always start where the person is at, not where you think they should be. An intervention can be a powerful thing, but it could also be overwhelming. Make sure to take care of yourself in the process, you can't help anyone unless you are emotionally and mentally ready.

Q. How is your mother doing now?

A. She is living at a facility which monitors her health and living situation. We are still looking for more resources which promote rehabilitating people with mental illness into society. It's very sad the mental healthcare system doesn't have enough resources for this. She is going to computer classes at the Pasadena senior center and feels connected to her community. She is receiving medication management at the UCLA compulsive hoarding out-patient center.

Q. What are your professional plans after this project?

A. I think it's important for me to fully understand the social-economical reasons why people who are outcast in society, therefore I would like to continue my interests in social work and get my MSW. I would also like to continue making documentaries and possibly a fictional story about my life.