



Montreal World Film Fest

Indestructible

(Docu)

An ALS Film Fund production. (International sales: ALS Film Fund, Winston Salem, North Carolina.) Produced by Ben Byer, Rebecca Rush. Co-producer, Roko Belic. Directed, written by Ben Byer.

With: Ben Byer, Steven Byer, Barbara Byer, Rebecca Rush, Oliver Sacks, Josh Byer.

By [EDDIE COCKRELL](#)

An intimate, lacerating, absorbing visual diary of the three-year onset of terminal disease Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) in aspiring filmmaker Ben Byer, "Indestructible" is an immersive, edifying journey of acceptance, setback and strength. Winner of the Maverick Spirit docu award at the 2007 Cinequest fest, the work will resonate beyond fests to ALS sufferers and their circles, with tube exposure and disc sales the obvious path to them.

Commonly known as Lou Gehrig's Disease, after the ballplayer who was among the first known to have succumbed, ALS is a progressive neurodegenerative condition for which there is no cure. It's "brought science to its knees," says one prominent medico marshaled among the requisite talking heads, while another calls it simply "the Grim Reaper." Nerve cells in the central nervous system stop sending messages to the brain, muscles atrophy, movement and speech become impossible -- all in three to five years. Physicist Stephen Hawking is a very rare exception to this timetable, vivid evidence that in the majority of cases, mental faculties remain preserved.

Diagnosed in 2002 at 31, happy-go-lucky Chicagoan Byer is separated from a wife who genially calls him "a freak," but he enjoys a loving relationship with young son John. Year one finds him wisecracking about having more time to watch TV and zig-zagging around the country to interview experts and fellow sufferers, including "Awakenings" author Dr. Oliver Sacks and a woman cared for by her family in Greece.

Year two brings concerted efforts to fight the disease. Byer and his father, Steven -- who confesses, "I don't know muscles from dog food" -- become involved with a Chinese herbal remedy. They fly to China and interview the inventor.

By 2005, Byer is still determined, but clearly deteriorating. He travels to Jerusalem to explore what "Judaism has to offer me" and climb Masada with burly brother Josh. A poignant coda flashes back to Byer's vid diary from years ago, where he expresses a sincere wish to become a helmer and see his work on the bigscreen.

Clearly the work of a man with much to say and little time in which to say it, the pic, punctuated by a vicious argument among his fiercely supportive family members, thrums with urgency, passion and a natural humor much deeper than the unpredictable laughing (and crying) jags symptomatic of the monstrous disease.

Tech credits are fine, particular given the disparate lineage of the material and the timeframe of the production. Lenser and co-producer Roko Belic directed 1999 indie sensation "Genghis Blues." Now in a wheelchair with no remaining arm movement and severely slurred speech, Byer remains inextinguishable, and was on hand for most of the Montreal fest at which the pic screened.

Camera (color, DV), Roko Belic; editor, Tim Baron; music, Brendan Canty; associate producer, Baron. Reviewed at Montreal World Film Festival (Documentaries of the World), Sept. 1, 2007. (In Cinequest Film Festival, San Jose.) Running time: 118 MIN.