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## **Loose Bodies**

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# **Loose Bodies**

by

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**Report**

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# **Loose Bodies**

by

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My thesis film for the Master of Fine Arts degree is a 10-minute documentary entitled *Loose Bodies*. It traces my mom's recovery from knee replacement surgery, meanwhile exploring her relationship to her knees through interviews and archival footage and my own relationship to my body's ability to move. The film contains three animated sequences, using the Renaissance anatomical drawings of Andreas Vesalius. This report is an account of the filmmaking process from initial idea to finished film.

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## Introduction

My thesis film for the Master of Fine Arts degree is a 10-minute personal documentary, partially animated, called *Loose Bodies*. The film is about my mom's recovery from knee replacement surgery; as I help take care of her, I develop greater sympathy for her experience, and come to a renewed appreciation of my own body.

As with my pre-thesis, *Substitutions*, I started with a very broad (too broad) idea, edited a first cut, and after feedback had to go back to the drawing board, ending up with a very different – and much shorter – film than I first intended. This report outlines my creative process from the beginning in spring 2002, through several iterations on paper, production, a first cut, and finally the film that I really began to put together in November in 2009. I also discuss fundraising efforts and collaboration with my animator and composer for *Loose Bodies*.

## Chapter 1: Development and Production Through November 2009

“How would it be to dance, knowing you have to die?” – Pina Bausch

### INITIAL IDEA

The original idea for my thesis was that it should be a film about sacrifice. Although I have learned in film school that abstract ideas do not make the best starting points for films, this idea came to me before I started film school; in fact, even before I wanted to be a filmmaker. In the spring of 2002, I was studying abroad in Paris. In May, just after I learned that my dad had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, I saw *Le Sacre du Printemps*, choreographed by Pina Bausch, at the Paris Opera. It was a profound emotional experience—I was uninitiated in both the music and the choreography. I was immediately taken with the impact of the piece.

In the years that followed I began to read about both *Le Sacre*, and about the idea of sacrifice. There was plenty of interest: the original production in Paris, just before the outbreak of World War I, has gone down in theater history. In the waning years of the Bush administration, watching reports of increasing environmental and social disaster, I was convinced that a film needed to be made about the necessity of sacrifice. But, how to translate that primal conviction into a film—and one that I could carry out with my still shaky, graduate student skills?

### DEVELOPING THE IDEA THROUGH COURSEWORK

That work began in the spring semester of 2008. In our “homeroom” class each of my colleagues and I were asked to prepare a presentation for the class about what we were anticipating for our thesis films. Most of us were preoccupied enough with our pre-thesis films that the thesis seemed far away, intangible, a dream. Everyone starts in a different place in the creation of a film; sometimes it’s a story, sometimes it’s an image; even a phrase of music. I chose to show an excerpt from a recreation of the original choreography from *Le Sacre* as well as groups of images I had collected around the idea of sacrifice—the *gueules cassés*, casualties of WWI; depictions of sacrifice in ancient art; images of blood donation and posters urging the population to donate during war time.

But, all that was still pretty vague. The idea had to be refined further for the “business plan” I produced for my Producing class during that same semester. Having to previsualize my film before being able to do the research, I crafted a story involving two people who embodied sacrifice at opposite ends of the political spectrum: a radical vegan, and a nondenominational preacher. Each of these characters would take us into their world and explain why they had made the unusual choice to follow a life of sacrifice. I also started to visualize a dance sequence, which would be a reenactment of an ancient sacrifice; my hope was to work with Charlotte Griffin, a fellow graduate student in the MFA choreography program.

During this semester I used the opportunity of a research paper to watch several recent documentaries for approach and style cues; particularly influential were *Jesus Camp* and *Protagonist*. *Jesus Camp* went “behind the scenes” of an American subculture concerned with the morality (or immorality) of the mainstream, and did so in a way that

was both thought provoking and fair. *Protagonist* combined highly stylized puppet-sequences with talking head interviews in a way that suggested that art and documentary could coexist peacefully and successfully.

## RESEARCH, FIRST SHOOTS AND REFINEMENT OF IDEA

Having made these initial attempts at expressing what I wanted my film to look like, I spent the summer of 2008 delving into research. I decided against the preacher and vegan idea because I didn't know how to find these characters I had invented in my head. Instead I focused on the researchable processes of blood and milk donation. I read what I could find about the history of blood transfusion and donation, and learned about breast milk donation from the days of wet nurses to the present. I started to collect visual references, and watched/listened to TV and radio programs that had been done on similar subjects. By August I felt sufficiently informed to start contacting people at local organizations in the hopes that they would let me interview them and start to build knowledge of the actual footage I could collect for my film.

Initial contact with the milk bank (Mother's Milk Bank at Austin) was with their executive director; soon I was introduced to the other administrators. They were open and enthusiastic about my project. The blood center was more difficult; I had a meeting with the PR person, but after our first meeting and tour of the donation center, she never responded to my emails or calls.

I was reluctant to be forcefully persistent when my idea was still in development. I was also getting feedback about the weakness of an approach featuring only two



“parts”—that there were dangers in the compare/contrast model for a film. Realizing that this was my last chance to make a film at UT with all the resources I had at my disposal—and a great time for experimentation—my ideas of what I wanted from the experience also began to change. Why not use this as a way to play with different editing styles? As for structure, what about the structure of the human body? After three years in film school I am not convinced that all documentaries need stories, but I *am* convinced that they need structure. From this period of questioning came the idea to do a four-part documentary, each part about a different area of the body, and each with a different style. The original four parts were the breast, the eyes, the feet, and the hands.

This idea has more or less endured through November 2009. I decided sometime during the spring of 2009 that I only had the resources to do three body parts; the particular parts also shifted, to the breast, the knee and the hands. Most important was the realization in May 2009—after significant shooting and even more research—that the film was really about healing, and specifically the human connection in healing. It was a long way from the vague, yet emotional, idea of sacrifice, yet the resonances were clear to me. The body was still at the center of my work, as were people (healers, donors) who in some way made sacrifices for the benefit of others.

## STYLISTIC INFLUENCES

Being a program that emphasizes the narrative aspect of filmmaking, UT-RTF encourages us to see how the strengths of fiction filmmaking can be applied to documentaries as well. Over my years in the program I grew to realize that my favorite

filmmakers were fiction filmmakers with a realistic, humanistic style, in particular Jean Renoir and Ingmar Bergman. These auteurs are not fashionable among young filmmakers, perhaps because of their sincerity. Yet I look to them for the effect that I want my film to have, that is, renewing of love for humanity, clarification of relationships, through a slightly absurd lens.

Less loftily, as I went into production I started to think about films that I could actually point to as references. For the breast sequence, which I initially wanted to be cold and emphasize the assembly line aspect of donor milk production, I looked at the style adopted by Frederick Wiseman to portray a potato processing plant in his film *Belfast, Maine*. I examined this sequence and made note of the techniques before the shoot at the Mother's Milk Bank.

In the back of my mind were documentaries I had seen that used style, particularly editing, in unusual ways. The semi-personal documentary *The Gleaners & I* by Agnes Varda is both very personal and informative and philosophical. Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* show the utter joy of filming, and how footage can be edited together in ways that go beyond pure "coverage." I tried to remember what was possible in planning my doc, in order not to fall into a formulaic notion of how to make my film.

The dance sequence was something new for me; documentaries are increasingly using stylistic flourishes (mostly, but not always, animation) to comment on their video material and provide additional visual interest. I wanted to try something along these lines. I had originally planned for a dance sequence, to be choreographed by my

colleague and friend, choreographer Charlotte Griffin. We had begun to plan the look and style of the dance when I realized that our schedules were not going to work out and I would have to wait to plan the dance sequence until after Charlotte had moved away from Austin. At this point (in the summer of 2009) I began to develop another idea I had, for an animated dance sequence. I had an idea for the basic story—that of a skeleton coming to life—but needed to develop the look and feel of the piece. From the beginning of the project I had been fascinated with old-fashioned anatomical drawings. Through talks with my classmates, Jaime Cano and Johanna Witherby, we came to an understanding of the style based on numerous visual references to animated black and white drawings and dance films such as Maya Deren's *Very Eye of Night*.

#### FUNDRAISING (OR NOT)

After taking Richard Lewis' producing class in the spring of 2008, I felt more capable of approaching the daunting grant application process. With a growing appreciation for how much money it takes to make a film, even with access to free equipment and cheap student labor, I decided to try to raise a small budget for my thesis film. I submitted my initial applications local and national granting organizations in December 2008. None was successful, and around that same time I also realized that I would need to take another semester to finish the film, finishing in December rather than August 2009. This would give me additional time to try to raise money, though it would also increase the cost of the film due to needing to pay for an additional semester of equipment access through school. Such is the dance of producing.

In January 2009, a scholarship competition for 5-minute videos about philanthropic foundations was announced through the RTF department. The prize was to be \$10,000 for first place (one at each of the participating schools); \$500 second prize, to the runners-up. I decided to enter the competition and make a promotional piece about the Mothers' Milk Bank, which had so generously allowed me to film their processes. This way they would have a piece that was just about them, that could be used for web promotion—something I couldn't promise about my thesis film. It would also give me experience doing a kind of production I hadn't done before, and thus be good experience. Even if I didn't get an award, it would be worthwhile. I spent a significant amount of time during the spring of 2009 working on this project.

I also continued to apply to other grants, including the 2009 Texas Filmmakers Production Fund. The application process became easier as I developed a more clear idea of what my project would look like. In late August 2009 I was informed that I had been rejected for TFPF also; since they offered to share feedback from the panelists, I asked to see what had been said. A couple of days later I received an email with a few lines of critique, fairly cryptic, but worthwhile. It was heartening to see that there had been some disagreement between the panelists; while one thought the project incoherent, the other thought it had potential. There seemed to be agreement that 30 minutes might be too long for my subject matter, and that there needed to be stronger evidence for what the film was about. Not all of the feedback was helpful: I was not sure what to make of the statement “previous work was ok.” (I had submitted my pre-thesis, *Substitutions*.) Having sorted

through 500 applications at ITVS as an intern, I was grateful for any feedback at all during an application round that I know was significantly larger than usual at TFPF.

In late August 2009 the Philanthropy Project announced its scholarships: Mother's Milk received an Honorable Mention and \$500. It wasn't what I was hoping for, but had anticipated that I would not win the major award. I did not profile one of the suggested organizations, and my film was more about the nonprofit being aided by a philanthropic foundation, not the foundation itself. Nevertheless, \$500 split two ways could provide a decent fee for an animator and composer, and that is what I planned to use the money for. At this point I decided to stop trying to fundraise and instead focus solely on finishing my film.

#### PRODUCTION BEFORE NOVEMBER 2009

Student filmmakers are taught that production is divided into three periods—pre-production, production, and post-production. In my experience, making documentaries—at least as a part time, independent occupation—these fields overlap quite a bit, with production needing to be started before any realistic attempt at writing a treatment, and logging and editing starting as soon as footage is shot. However, even if “production” coincided in time with pre-production and post, it is possible to talk about the actual shoots involved separate from the other aspects of making the film.

I started thinking about how to develop crew relationships in the summer of 2008. Ideally I wanted to work with the same cameraperson throughout the filming process; having worked shoots as a combo director/sound/camera person, I knew this did not bring

out the best in my footage. I also wanted to work with an assistant editor, and perhaps a research assistant. However, given scheduling/availability issues, and the loose commitments necessitated by non-paying work, it was unlikely I'd be able to work with a steady crew. Nevertheless, I had a list of people I could call on for help, and having that was a major step forward from the early days of grad school when my network was small. Also, sometimes serendipity comes into play. In fall 2008, I communicated with colleague and fellow documentarian Tim Tsai about our respective needs for production, and it seemed like we might be able to work out a complementary arrangement of shooting for each other.

My first shoot was scheduled for late November 2008, at the Mothers' Milk Bank. I had been given a tour of the milk bank's operations and had also spent one morning volunteering in the milk processing room, so I had a pretty good idea of what we'd encounter. I also had watched the Wiseman potato processing sequence for ideas about what shots to get. Tim and I went in with just the camera and tripod; natural light was plentiful due to a large window. As the volunteers worked to mix, pour, bottle, and pasteurize the milk, we stood in the corner and tried to cover their actions as best we could.

I had decided to use the Sony EX-3 camera, one of the newest acquisitions in the school's video equipment. This shoot was the first time Tim or I had used the camera (except for tests) and things went pretty smoothly. The camera's image is quite nice, but one large drawback, especially for small documentary crews is that the recording media only lasts for an hour, and after that it must be transferred to a hard drive to clear space

for more. Without an assistant to manage the laptop download process, the card limitations were a de facto limitation to one hour recording time—possibly an encouragement to be efficient, but also potentially a hazard if you hit on unexpected gold.

Soon after the MMBA shoot I downloaded the footage and was pleased with what we had captured. I started to communicate with the MMBA directors about getting access to a donor mom, and to a NICU, where I could shoot the “beginning” and “end” of the cycle of milk donation, since we had just shot the “middle.” I knew these shoots would probably need to take place in the new year, given the time it would take to arrange them and the fact that the winter break was coming up quickly.

In the meantime I was preparing to be my mom’s caregiver as she underwent knee replacement surgery and rehab, starting in mid-December. I decided to shoot this process as part of my documentary—to do something “productive” with what would otherwise be a pretty depressing, and not film related, Christmas holiday. I needed a camera that I could take unobtrusively into hospital and doctor office environments, that I could have with me over the course of the winter break, and that would shoot in a format that would mesh with the EX-3 footage I planned to use throughout the rest of the documentary. Fortunately, I discovered that the Instructional Media Center had just such a camera, the Sanyo Xacti, and they would allow me to check it out for the three weeks in December that they would be closed. Problem solved! The little camera was totally unobtrusive, and didn’t even look like a camera due to its unusual vertical shape. I was able to put medical personnel at ease when I used it, and most of them assumed I was documenting my

mom's recovery for personal or utilitarian reasons, such as how to change a bandage, or set up an electrical stimulation machine.

My mom had surgery in December 2008. I had the camera with me at the hospital for the two days she was there; then at her house, where I stayed during the first 10 days of her recovery. I also took it with me when we visited doctors offices and, later, the physical therapist. This was instinctive shooting, for the most part, though I knew I was visually interested in the knee; in joints; in evidence of machines or mechanical processes. I also knew I needed to keep it largely anonymous and not show faces since, especially in the medical environments, getting permission would be difficult. Since the ordeal was taking place over Christmas, which we celebrate, I also tried to include some of our attempts at Christmas celebration. I had already conceived of the section as being very personal (to me), possibly structured like a diary, with my own recollections as voiceover. As such, the imagery could be less expository and more impressionistic. It was a chance to play with shooting real life as it felt, not as it looked to an impartial observer. After the initial shooting, which took place between mid-December and early January, I checked out the camera two more times to show the continued therapy process and my mom's transition to being able to walk again. In all, I only had about an hour and a half of footage, but because it had taken place over the course of months, it showed the development of a story more clearly than is typical in 90 minutes of raw documentary footage.

At the same time, much of my time during spring 2009 was taken up with producing the 5-minute Filmanthropy Competition short (mentioned above). The rules of



the competition stipulated that the piece had to be at least tangentially about a foundation—so I had to find a foundation that supported the Mothers’ Milk Bank. As it turned out, the Junior League of Austin had worked with the MMBA for years. Through their connections in the community, the MMBA was able to put me in touch with a woman who was a member of the Junior League who had also volunteered for the MMBA, and who had a powerful story.

Brenda Salemie had been pregnant with triplets and delivered very early, at 22 weeks. Two of the three babies died within 24 hours after birth, but her third child, Gabriel, was big enough that the medical team did everything they could to help him survive. Gabriel spent months in the NICU, where at first he was given donated human milk, since Brenda was on medication and couldn’t give him her own. He got bigger and was doing well, but soon after they brought him home from the hospital, he died suddenly, due to a cause the doctors were not able to explain. Brenda had been pumping and saving her breastmilk all along, and had a freezer full of milk at the time of Gabriel’s death. She decided that it would help her grief to be able to donate this milk to the milk bank, which had helped Gabriel when he was first born. So she gave over 700 ounces, and eventually volunteered at the milk bank and helped them with their marketing efforts. About 18 months after Gabriel’s death, Brenda gave birth to a healthy daughter, Sophia.

I had already interviewed (off camera) two of the lead staff at the MMBA, and after I did a lengthy pre-interview with Brenda, I wrote a script for the piece and started to plan production. I would need interviews with Brenda and one of the MMBA directors, as well as footage from the NICU. I also needed to bring in the Junior League, and

planned to do an interview with their director as well. Brenda and her family had taken lots of pictures of Gabriel, their miracle baby, and she was willing to let me use those as well.

Around this same time I was starting to accumulate leads on filming a breast milk donor, and the NICU at Seton (through the MMBA). There were two women who were willing to let me film them as they pumped and stored their milk, so I set up pre-interviews with them so I could introduce myself and the project before I brought in the camera. I also scoped out the Seton NICU with Seton's PR manager, Matilda Sanchez. The shoot there needed to be carefully scheduled and would be under scrutiny so I didn't feel like I had a second chance to get it right; I wanted to make sure I was prepared when I took the camera in. Finally, with the pre-interviews done, the script written, and dates scheduled for the shoots (and equipment reserved), it was time to start shooting. Tim could help with the interviews of Brenda and Bridget; Amy Bench could help shoot the breast milk donor; and I would have to do the NICU shoot by myself.

The morning of the NICU shoot I loaded my car with equipment and drove to Seton, where I parked in the garage and hauled in the gear by myself, waiting in the lobby and watching patients and their families enter and exit, while waiting for Matilda to meet me so we could go up to the NICU together. It was a sobering moment and reminded me of what it was like to be in a hospital on more serious business, and made me anxious to do justice to the emotion of that moment in my work. Matilda was running a little late, but finally came to get me and led me through the maze of the hospital to the NICU floor, where we again waited outside the secured doors to get permission to go

inside. It was my goal to get footage of babies being fed with donor breast milk, but this proved a bit of a challenge because only a few of the babies were on breast milk, and I needed their parents' permission; with parents and nurses coming and going, permission was a challenge. But I was assured that if I waited it was likely the parents of the recently born quintts would be in before long. In the meantime I got shots of the empty wing of the NICU (no privacy issues there), and also the arrival and preparation of a new batch of donated milk from the milk bank. Finally the parents of the quintts arrived and allowed me to film them as they fed two of their new babies. Matilda stood and watched, and helped me by carrying some of my gear. I had to turn the gain up high on the camera because the NICU has to remain dark. The shoot would have been easier, and probably produced better footage, if a number of things had been different: if I had longer, could have been assured of having multiple babies/families to shoot, and had at least one other person to help me shoot. But the footage I got was usable, thanks to the preparation I had done, and the low-light capabilities of the camera. Another important thing that happened during this shoot was that I was introduced to NICU manager Catherine Carby, who mentioned the practice of kangaroo care; months later I interviewed her and she became an important part of the film.

I now had the middle and end of the journey of breast milk from donor to recipient—now I needed to get footage of a donor as she pumped and stored her milk. This was one (rare) instance where being a female filmmaker was a definite advantage, as making this request was less suspicious coming from a woman. Fortunately I also had access to a female shooter. I had met Anjuli and seen her apartment before we did the

shoot. On the day of the shoot, Amy and I drove up to Round Rock to film Anjali as she did her morning pumping and storing of 5 ounces of breast milk. She bravely allowed us to shoot almost the whole pumping, asking us to stop only as she attached and detached the pump. We also were able to get some footage of her young son Brendan as he played on the floor.

I had also been in communication with another breast milk donor, Debbie Copley. Because of timing and scheduling, I went ahead with the Anjali shoot though I thought Debbie would probably come across better onscreen. Debbie and I had set up a date far in advance (due to her schedule, and my access to equipment) so when the date rolled around I already had the Anjali footage. But, I decided to go ahead and interview Debbie on camera but not ask her to pump for the camera. Debbie was interesting because she had been a donor (off and on) for 20 years, since she had her kids spaced far apart. She had seen pump technology change a lot and since, at that point, I was more interested in the connection between technology and the body, I decided I would interview her on that subject. I also did this interview by myself, and it shows in the footage—it's usable, but doesn't look very good.

The next few weeks I was taken up with editing the Filmanthropy piece and finishing up the semester (lots of grading, and a major paper). The next interview I did was in June, but had been arranged some time before. I had seen mention of a professor in the Communications school named Jurgen Streeck, who studied gestural communication. I thought that with his emphasis on the hands, I might be able to get him to comment on some of the themes in my film. We met, and he had given me a lot of his

published work so that I could narrow down my questions. Though I was not sure of the connection, I was too interested in the material not to pursue it, so I decided to arrange an interview with Dr. Streeck on how the hands have evolved, and their importance in the way humans experience the world. The interview was frustrating because I ended up asking questions that Dr. Streeck couldn't answer because he hadn't specifically done research in those areas; I also knew as it was happening that the subject matter was only tenuously connected to the main themes of my film. But I was hopeful that it could be worked in somehow, and was reluctant to say no to an opportunity to gather more footage. Tim helped me shoot, but the image was disappointing; too dark on Dr. Streeck's face despite a room that had nice natural light.

Around that same time, I had been doing preliminary research for the "hand" section of the film. I had met with several people off-camera to explain various aspects of massage to me. I knew I wanted to profile a massage therapist who used his or her skills to help people who were severely ill or injured, or dying. After meeting with a man who had significant experience as a hospice massage volunteer, I realized that making the "hand" section about hospice massage would be so weighty as to unbalance the rest of the film. So instead I pursued a name I had for a massage therapist whose specialty was the elderly. A phone call I placed to Jon Sullivan was returned almost immediately, and because I happened to have equipment checked out at the time, I decided to go ahead with an initial interview, though I would be going into it blind, having never met Jon or seen the space. He suggested I also interview the client he would be finishing up with when I arrived, so I did an hour-long interview with Jon and his 70-year-old client, where

she mostly sat to the side listening. It was an information-gathering interview that couldn't be used much on screen, but let me know that there was more to pursue with Jon; he generously showed me video of all the aspects of his practice, and I said I would follow up to arrange a time for me to shoot one of his weekly volunteer trips to a nursing home in South Austin.

I took another break from shooting for several weeks and worked on editing the footage I had gathered so far, trying to determine how to approach upcoming shoots in the most efficient way. I knew I needed more footage for the “knee” and “hand” sections; I was also pretty sure I needed more for the “breast” section. Each section was being approached in a different way, dictating different kinds of shooting. Soon I decided to seek an “expert” interview for the breast section—preferably with Catherine Carby—someone who could speak to the medical importance of human touch and human milk in the NICU. I resumed my contact with Matilda and asked if it would be possible to schedule an interview sometime in the last two weeks of July. She had some juggling to do on her end, so while that was going on I also followed up with a physical therapist whose name I had been given by a massage therapist; someone who could talk about the knee joint and what recovering from total knee replacement entails. Finally I arranged a day to follow Jon at the nursing home, which was easy because he has a regular schedule and a very friendly relationship with the staff; he assured me they wouldn't mind if I brought in my camera. At last I had a full week of shooting arranged, and equipment reserved. After some negotiating with a couple of different shooters, Amy offered to do all three shoots so she could feel more invested in the shoot. This was a big relief, as was

the fact that she could haul the equipment in her car, which had an air conditioner, unlike mine. I gave her gas money and thanked my good luck that all the pieces had fallen into place so well.

That week the shoots were arranged Wednesday-Thursday-Friday, with equipment return Friday afternoon. Catherine's interview would be first, the nursing home second, and Pieter Kroon, the physical therapist, last on Friday. This kind of schedule would only be possible while not taking classes, but it was a good way to get a lot more footage in the can and be significantly further along towards completion when the week was done.

We had planned to do the interview with Catherine Carby in a courtyard at Seton—Matilda said we wouldn't know exactly where would be best until the day of, but the building was the same as the NICU shoot. Matilda called me the morning of the interview to let me know the location had changed, and we would now be at Dell Children's Hospital instead, a location I had never seen. Luckily Amy had recommended that I add a c-stand to my checkout list, and she brought a bounceboard, so we were able to set up in a location outdoors that was shady just long enough to get the interview completed. With Amy's good eye, the interview is quite visually pleasing. Catherine was also an easy interview—she answered in complete sentences, was calm and persuasive on camera, and was familiar with the subject matter I asked her about. It was hot outside, but otherwise it was a very good start to the week.

The next day we met Jon Sullivan in South Austin and followed him as he did massages on several of the patients in a nursing home that he visits weekly. Amy was in

her element as she covered the sessions hand-held. I had given her notes about what to look for ahead of time so for the most part she just shot while I stood out of the way with the extra equipment. Later, in looking at the footage I was happy with what we got with a couple of exceptions (both my fault): we had a wireless mic on Jon, but it would have been good to also have a boom to get the sound from the patients, instead of having the second mic being the on-camera mic. Also, while I noticed the remarkable fact that one of the patients had clearly had a double knee replacement (from the scars) which would be a great thing in the editing room, I failed to mention this to Amy and as a result she didn't shoot any footage of the man's knees. As with being in the Seton waiting room months earlier, visiting the nursing home was a reminder of the real lives that seek healing, sometimes desperately, every day.

Catherine's interview and the nursing home shoot had both gone well. Our last shoot, with Pieter Kroon, was more of a struggle. It was Friday, and more importantly, Amy had been on a shoot between Thursday afternoon until late in the night, out of town, and had only gotten a couple hours of sleep. Further, I had never met Pieter nor been to his office, so again we were blind going in and I would have to do some probing in the interview to see if and how it would actually work. Nonetheless we got a nice shot inside the therapy room, with plenty of depth; the only problem was that, like the Streeck interview, Pieter's face was a bit too dark. He was personable and open in the interview, and I managed to ask a few questions he could respond well to, so it was overall a pretty good shoot. Again, it would have been nice to have a boom operator, as there was a lot of ambient noise, and I didn't do a very good job of holding the mic at the same time as



trying to be a good interviewer.

With the Pieter Kroon interview completed, I felt like I had enough footage to assemble a reasonably complete rough cut, so I decided to postpone more shoots until I had that completed and knew with more precision exactly what I needed. At this point I was hopeful that all that was left was pickups, or in other words, that the bulk of the shooting was done. I also was anxious to get feedback on an early rough cut, as much of my dissatisfaction from my most recent film came from not having enough feedback before having to complete it.

## BEGINNING ANIMATION

I also spent a significant amount of time during the summer of 2009 developing the animation sequence and finding an animator. The original idea had been to do a dance sequence but I decided in early June that I didn't have the resources to make that happen in late July (which I would have to do if I wanted to work with Charlotte). So I went to plan B, animation, which had the additional benefit of being inherently visually interesting—where live action dance might or might not be. Since the inception of the project I had been drawn to the black and white anatomical drawings—first in an old fetal pig dissection manual of my dad's, and later in the beautiful, old drawings of artist/doctor Andreas Vesalius. These anatomical drawings became the basis for the animation, which would simply show a skeleton becoming fleshly again, through the healing touch of a second being.

Not having taken any kind of animation class or knowing anything about it beyond a very basic understanding of hand-drawn animation, I was shooting blind when it came to describing what I wanted. Luckily I knew I could turn to some of my classmates who were much better versed in animation than I was. First I asked Jaime Cano, whose work I had seen and whom I knew had an encyclopedic knowledge of the art form. Jaime and I met for a couple of hours to hash out the process and look of the animation, and Jaime said he was interested in doing the animation himself but needed some time to decide. A couple of weeks later he determined he needed to focus more on his own work and could not commit to doing the work himself. In the meantime I had talked to Johanna Witherby about the project, and she had expressed interest. I had done some producing work for Johanna so in that sense I felt better about asking this favor of her; also her enthusiasm was a good sign. Johanna and I met and after a few days' thought she committed to helping with the project, with a finish date for the animation of late October. I scanned the images she would be using at a high resolution, transferred them to her, and crossed my fingers.

#### FIRST FULL EDIT

As already stated, production on my thesis was not neatly divided into phases of pre-production, production, and post-production. Since my earliest attempts at filmmaking I have always captured footage soon after shooting it; this is the only way to see what you have, see if there are technical issues with the camera, and keep the footage fresh in mind as you accumulate more. Since there is practically no capturing process

with the XDCAM footage—it copies to a hard drive very quickly—there was no built in time to log the footage. Instead, I logged it somewhat haphazardly at first, and later came to more of a systematic approach. I decided to place all the segments from one shoot in a timeline, add a timecode burn-in (which didn't always match the actual timecode), and log it as one long sequence. This way I could see all of the footage together and scroll back and forth, rather than having what is essentially subclips, which are created in-camera in the EX-3 whenever you start or stop recording. Transcribing these long sequences and using them subsequently in editing proved fairly useful; I could refer to the timecode in my log, find the place in the sequence, and then use the match frame function to go directly to the clip I needed to work with.

The time I put in to transcribing the footage, especially the interviews, paid off immensely. After the first transcription and print out, I often went back and watched the interview again to take notes on the paper (on moments that stood out, potential edit points, etc.) Having never used transcripts myself in such an organized way, I am convinced that I will continue to use this method in the future. In fact, when I brought on an assistant editor, I hesitated to have her take over the logging despite the fact that it was a logical thing for her to do. The process of watching and typing out the footage was too important for me.

Throughout the winter and early spring of 2009 I was mostly logging footage without much attempt at creating sequences. Late in the spring I decided to try to find an assistant editor. I wanted to do this both to have someone to collaborate with (the essential “second pair of eyes”) and also to have the experience of trying to communicate

my idea to someone else so that they could help carry out the vision I had in my head. However during the late spring I was taken up with other responsibilities and didn't devote the time I should have to finding someone to collaborate with who was a good match. Also, it is hard to find someone to work for free and do this kind of creative work—other grad students, who will work for free, usually are too busy to devote the kind of time needed to help edit a documentary. I ended up “hiring” one of the first people who contacted me, a recent graduate who wants to make a career out of editing. Unfortunately, she had very little time to devote to the project due to juggling several paying and non-paying jobs, and living far from campus (and training for a marathon). Though she clearly has talent for cutting in terms of visual rhythm, it eventually became clear that I could not articulate what I wanted in a way that she could spend the few hours a week she had making something worthwhile. So that experiment was short-lived, but in the future if I am in the position to hire an editor I'll know better what kind of commitment they need to be able to bring, and what kind of clarity I need to be able to communicate.

After August I tackled my own edit, which I spent roughly 10 hours a week working on. In mid-October I had a cut ready to show, which I screened for about 10 people, both filmmakers and civilians. The film, which I was then calling *Milagro*, ran about 22 minutes and stuck to the “three part” structure I had been developing in my treatments. When I watched the cut again recently, I was struck by how scattered it appeared. It contains a lot of information, and I put a great deal of work into it, but it is hard to tell what the movie is about. It is instructive to see this more clearly, with several

months' distance. At the time, I thought the connections between the disparate pieces were at least somewhat visible; now I'm not sure.

This feedback I received at the time, though partially positive, convinced me that I needed to take a different approach to the film and that I would not be able to finish by the early December deadline. I decided to take one more semester to finish, but not take any extra classes and keep my other obligations to a minimum so I could really focus on my film.

## Chapter 2: Production and Post After November 2009

### REFORMING THE IDEA

Although I had decided that I needed to take a different approach with the film, I didn't yet know what this new approach would be. I knew I needed to choose carefully, but was not feeling inspired or intuitively grasping what direction I should take. To help me get some ideas for how to approach a short documentary, I watched several short docs, mostly from the Full Frame Shorts DVD compilations. This was a good exercise because it showed me how small and succinct subjects needed to be in order to work in the short documentary form.

The feedback I had received for my first rough cut tended to be most positive around the story of my mom's knee replacement. People found her sympathetic and her story emotionally intense in a way that the other two sections of the film were not. Eventually I came to the conclusion that I needed to make the film more about her and her knees – and that I could take an approach that used audio and visual materials separately (i.e., audio interview with non-sync video) to avoid a reliance on talking-head footage, which I had decided was pretty boring in most cases. I knew that I had access to (free) archival material for my mom, and also easy access to her for interviews. The film would undoubtedly be personal, which made me a little uncomfortable, but otherwise it seemed like a good solution to the various problems I was trying to fix. Meanwhile, I continued to work with Johanna on the animation, which was still an integral part of the overall conception of the film.

I did a second interview with my mom and got her to talk about how her knee

problems had affected her throughout her life – not just the knee replacement surgery and her recovery from that. I had a feeling that I could make a story out of her lifelong knee travails, which I had heard about as I grew up, but I needed to record her talking about them before I could be sure. The second interview gave me enough material that I was convinced I could make a film.

### CHANGES GOING FORWARD

I approached this “second draft” of the film differently than I had the first – both because I knew better what I wanted and because I knew I really did have to graduate in May of 2010. One of the biggest changes was that I focused solely on finishing the film – deciding against teaching or other part time work, and not taking classes. In order to afford this choice I moved in with my mom. Having the time, energy and mental space to really concentrate on the film was, I think, central to my ability to craft it into something I was happy with.

I also reformed my intention for the film. Before, it had been about an idea, or several intersecting ideas. In the new cut, I decided to focus more on emotion and a specific story, with the hope that broader themes would emerge on their own. This new approach was dictated by a need for more clarity in the film as well as an imitation of the kinds of subjects I saw other short documentaries taking on. I also decided to use personal voiceover as an integral part of the film, which would increase clarity but require more from me emotionally. Accompanying this new approach was the ability to shoot intentionally, almost in a scripted way, rather than “covering” events with the

expectation that they would fit together in some way later. This felt like a little bit of a betrayal of the documentary form, but I got over it. Using the Sanyo camera gave me flexibility in terms of when I could shoot – since I could count on being able to check it out when I wanted to from the IMC, as opposed to the relatively difficult and limited checkouts I could count on through Equipment Checkout. Again, a simple thing like having access to a camera seems to be a big factor in making a documentary that is less important when making a scripted fiction film. Finally, I knew I would need a significant additional amount of footage to “fill out” what I already had for the knee section of the film. I had spent a summer organizing our family’s photographs some years earlier (and had some professional experience as an archival researcher) so the increased use of archival material was a natural evolution. Finally, I did a re-evaluation of the 16:9 frame, which I hadn’t carefully considered before. Coming from having shot in 4:3, and with an interest in oral history, I was naturally inclined toward interviews. I started to discover that the widescreen frame required more careful planning but also had greater potential for visual interest. I tried to keep these things in mind as I shot additional footage.

To stay on track as I went forward, I did a fair amount of intentional organization of materials and structuring of the film, more so than had seemed necessary in other films I had made. I reread all the audio interview transcripts and coded the sections I was interested in numerically, for easy reference in Avid. I also numerically coded the archival photographs. More difficult was the new approach I took to editing – basically creating a script each time I had a cut that was more or less as complete as I could get it at the time. I tried to make sure that each sequence in the film both was logically placed



(related to what came before and after) and had a clear importance to the development of the film as a whole. I continued this process throughout the spring and it helped me see how the film was working more clearly – which was a challenge given the personal nature of the material.

Overall this new way of working was easier for me than how I had been working before. I often felt like the next step was clear, whereas before (and on previous films) I had spent a lot of time not knowing exactly what I needed to do, which created a lot of anxiety. I credit the simplification of story for this change, though I think that a growing facility with editing and increasing knowledge of film history help as well.

#### EDITING AND FINE TUNING

As I put together my new cut, I was working with my collaborators for animation, music, and sound. Johanna encountered a lot of technical problems with the animation that neither of us had anticipated. Mostly they had to do with the high resolution of the files and the large number of layers she was working with in AfterEffects. I didn't know how to help except by communicating with tech staff (Susanne Kraft and Jeremy Gruy) when necessary. Johanna was pleased with the way the animation looked but spent much longer on the process than we had thought would be needed. This was disturbing but we decided to go ahead with the animation as planned. I helped with some of the grunt work of cleaning up the scanned images when I could.

I had hired a composer, Gregg Lee, in the early fall of 2009. He had given me a couple of cuts based on what I knew I wanted for music at that point, but I decided to wait to do more work until I had a good rough cut – which ended up being in mid-

February 2010. At that point I found a bunch of temp music to use in the cut, made a cd for Gregg and asked him to work with those influences to come up with a few pieces for the film. As with Johanna, I offered to pay him a small amount. Gregg had received a degree in music in the 1980s and been in a number of bands, but now he works full time as an engineer – he’s trying to get back into composing. He was enthusiastic and timely in recording, but didn’t want to have to do any cut more than once and we had some difficulty communicating.

As the film was turning into a piece that explored memories and deep emotions, I knew sound design would play an important role in rounding out the experience. I set my mix date for the end of April with the intention of locking picture at the end of March and spending a few weeks just working on sound. I worked with classmate Dan Stuyck to gather sounds and also recorded and otherwise scrounged up effects myself.

I had finished my prethesis film without much feedback from my peers, which was a persistent regret, and a mistake I wanted to avoid with my thesis. However, I lacked a strong group of documentary colleagues. I had received quite a bit of feedback on my first rough cut in October, but by the spring it was harder to get people to respond to my emails requesting they watch and comment on a cut. Nevertheless, thanks to my thesis committee and a handful of friends who helped me see my rough cuts with fresh eyes. Absent class time for this purpose, it is a real challenge to assemble people to look at a cut in a room; on the computer, it is a request that is hard to take seriously. This is one area where I think the master’s program could use a different approach; perhaps

students who make narrative films (which tend to be more collaborative) escape this problem, but I have observed it among some other doc-makers as well.

In any case, by the end of March I was close to being able to lock picture. I could check out the camera and audio equipment if I needed to, but for the most part was planning on keeping the structure the way it was and devoting the rest of my time to sound design, some visual effects, and other finishing touches.

## FINAL WEEKS

April was a busy month, between managing the music and animation, creating a sound design, making final cuts to the film and lots of other details. Most tasks went smoothly, and I was fortunate to end up with a better film than I had anticipated, due largely to a fortuitous coincidence (more on that below).

The music took less managing than the animation. After a third revision of the ending music, I edited what I had into the film and after a few days was pretty sure that what I had worked. I told Gregg I was happy and no further revisions were needed. The animation, on the other hand, continued to be technically difficult and time-consuming, both of which qualities were exacerbated by network problems at the school over the weekend of April 24-25. Luckily I had asked Johanna to have the animation finished the week before, so she had already been working hard to get it done – but because of the complexity of the project, the deadlines we had set just kept passing by. Even after my sound mix we continued to work on the animation and I suspect it will be the last thing wrapped on the whole project before I output to tape.

I worked for about a week and a half on sound design – alternating between sequences that used only music under the dialog and other sequences that created more of a realistic soundscape with ambience and effects. I found this process pretty tedious, especially when I had to sync effects, such as footsteps. However, I went into my mix well prepared and ended up using only one day out of three that were scheduled – partially due to the short runtime of the film and the simplicity of its sound design, I am sure, but I do think I put a lot of work into it ahead of time as well. Working with sound designer Chris Keyland we cleaned up the dialog, replaced a few effects and ambiences, and generally made the whole thing sound better.

The most important thing that happened in April was that I saw the film on a big screen in a room with other people. This came about through coincidence – the tech staff happened to be setting up the projection so I could test my footage and see how it looked, so I took the opportunity though I hadn't asked for it. I was concerned that the Sanyo footage would look bad, especially in relation to the crispness of the animation. As I watched the cut, other people were in the room setting up for an event – not watching my film – but their presence made me see the film differently enough that I got a clearer picture of its flaws and started to think about ways to fix them. The Sanyo footage looked fine – what I was concerned about was that the narrative was not immediately coherent, and the vocal performance (my voiceover) was not striking the right tone. I took a day to rescript the voiceover and then recorded it directly to a computer, while watching the film, using facilities in the Digital Media Labs. This improved my timing and performance immensely and I think makes the film much stronger.

My sound mix took place on April 28 and over the next week I will be working to finish the animation and then burning dvds and outputting to tape. I plan to apply to film festivals and possibly seek distribution funding. Perhaps with themes of aging, disability, and mother/daughter relationships (i.e., women's issues) the film will find a niche. I believe it is watchable and emotionally resonant, but it remains to be seen whether those qualities will carry it forward to any kind of audience.

## Conclusion

When I was making the first cut of the film, it took me a long time to realize how personal the subject matter of the documentary was—I was drawn to make a work about the body before I realized exactly why this was a subject I could commit to. Since the year 2000, I have been a caregiver to my grandmother and father, both of whom died from cancer, and for my mother, who has had multiple knee surgeries. In the fall of 2008, I myself had surgery for the first time. All of this time in the halls of hospitals, doctors' offices, and rehab provoked questions, as did my changing sense of the capabilities of the human body, and the physicality of aging. In the end, only a truly personal documentary made sense in terms of exploring these emotions.

Although *Loose Bodies* looks very different than I thought it would, I think many of the themes that were originally bouncing around in my brain are still there. At root, it can be seen as a story of parental sacrifice – only through my mom's inability to enjoy movement, and the pain she experiences, do I come to a real appreciation of my own body's abilities. I also believe that I stayed true to my initial desire to make a non-topical documentary. This will undoubtedly make marketing the film more difficult, but I feel like it was worth it to take this approach with my last grad school film.

Going forward, I'll change some things about my approach to filmmaking and keep other work habits the same. In terms of changes, I found that research needs to be conducted in person with your subject; reading about it is necessary and helpful in conversation, but in-person research is much more helpful in terms of what will make a film. I'll probably shoot at a higher ratio and look for subjects that are more visually

interesting. I'll do everything I can to develop a strong network of colleagues who I can turn to for feedback when I have a cut I want to share. In the hopes of making documentaries that get seen, I'll start paying more attention to trends in the documentary world, particularly by following the news coming out of film festivals. Most important, I'll turn to my personal connection to the subject when I get stuck and don't know what to do next in the process of making the film.

Work habits I used on the film that I will return to include a method of script usage I developed on the film - making a script (from a cut), then rewatching and taking notes on the paper script. Perhaps everyone does this but I had never thought to do it before! I also developed a rhythm of work that I think worked out quite well for me and that I hope to continue when I have my own creative projects in the future: a steady but not constant pace, leaving time between work sessions but not so much time that I forget where I left off. I found a good amount of work to be about 12 hours per week, spread over 3-4 days.

Making *Loose Bodies* was a transformative experience, personally, intellectually and artistically. From very beginning to end, it was an eight-year process. It turned out much different than I had imagined, but I learned a great deal along the way. I can only hope for such experiences as I make films in the future.

## Appendix A: Script

	VIDEO	INTERVIEW/VO	FX	MUSIC
	00:00			
T1	Text: Loose Bodies  Legs and hips stand at right			
	00:06			
B1	Skeleton legs break apart and fall to a heap on the ground  TKR video – pulling up stocking	When my mom had her left knee replaced a couple of years ago, I was hopeful that she'd finally be able to do some of the things she'd always wanted to do.  Her knee dislocated for the first time when she was 12.		Piano improv #0
	00:26			
A1	Self portrait age 12  backyard video	I was in the back yard. And I had a ball. And I was just kind of kicking it around the back yard. And I kicked it pretty hard. I was trying to kick it I guess across the yard.  And while my right leg was up in the air after the kick. My left knee dislocated. And I fell down.  I just lay there, I couldn't get up.  There was nothing I liked better than running. I kind of saw myself as a runner.	Birds ambience  Kicking ball  Ambient hum	



		I had to give up running completely.		
	01:16			
B2	Long shot girl with baton in street	She also had wanted to be a dancer		Piano improv #0
	01:23			
A2	MS two girls with batons	I tried out for the drill team when I was in high school. And I was so cautious about moving around during the tryout session that I looked foolish.	Marching band	
	01:32			
B3	Ballet pics archival  Ballet video archival  Knees in waiting room	Many years later she put me in ballet classes. I could do it because my knees weren't bad like hers. But I resented her for making me be a ballerina.  I was awkward and uncomfortable in a leotard and tights.  But when I helped take care of her after her operation, I began to hear the disappointment in her voice more clearly.		Piano improv #1
	02:10			
A3	drill team practice	And I can remember the look on the gym teachers faces.	Whistles	

	team photo	Finally one of them did just say, Reggie. This is not going to work. I'm sorry.	Team practice ambience	
	02:24			
B4	RA showing artwork	Denied the ability to run and dance, she continued to be fascinated with the human body.  Sometimes, she had nightmares.		Piano improv #1
	02:41			
A4	Moon and clouds	I have had a lot of dreams through my life about not being able to run.  You know, there being some kind of threat that I needed to run from.	Bee soundbed  Wings against cage	Nightmare scene
	03:11			
B5	Scars revealed  CPM machine	Looking at that scar, I started to realize how painful her knees must have been in order to make an operation like this worthwhile.  While she was recovering, I'd try to get her excited by reminding her that would only be a matter of weeks before she could be more active – get on the bike, go swimming, walk the dog. She'd kind of nod and go back to sleep.		Piano improv #5

		Outside, I started to see things a little differently.		
	03:51			
B6	statue knees Pieter Kroon Animation – legs rebuild	Walking started to seem miraculous.  I talked to a physical therapist. He told me about a man who had a knee replacement and is running marathons.  At the same time, he also explained that the knee is complicated and delicate. More so than other joints, like the hip.		Statues scene
	04:26			
A5	MS knee w/ scar in dr's office, dr lifting leg Xrays MS XRays CU Ortho cabinet WS Old fashioned ball joints CU	it's shocking, after having a deformed joint for my whole life it was shocking to know that my joint had been made symmetrical  It's not like having a normal joint though, Because you can absolutely feel and experience every single minute the artificiality of it. It feels very, very fake.  When your foot hits the ground you feel a clank. You feel those two artificial parts impacting one another.  And every step you take you feel it.	Electric lightbulb hum	

	05:17			
B7	<p>Running footage</p> <p>Insert boots</p>	<p>We live in a culture that celebrates people who overcome disabilities. Yet my mom seemed determined to hold onto hers, to mark herself as different in some way.</p> <p>I puzzled over this while running around the track.</p> <p>And then I remembered. My dad had problems with his legs too. Because of multiple surgeries after a motorcycle accident, one of his legs was shorter than the other.</p> <p>Maybe, for both of them, their handicap wasn't something to get over, but a central part of their lives, a point of resonance, a reason for attraction.</p>		Running scene
	05:55			
A6	<p>RA/MNA contact sheets – pan/zoom</p>	<p>Well I think we both figured out, realized early that we both had handicaps.</p> <p>Mine was much less obvious than his, because one of his legs was shorter than the other and he walked with a limp.</p> <p>But you didn't have to get to know me too well before you knew there were some issues with the knees.</p>	<p>Wilderness loop</p> <p>Diving</p> <p>Water splashing against boat</p>	

		I think that just the fact that he had that incapacity created for me a kind of trust or understanding because it's a shared experience...		
	06:52			
B8	16mm baby film  Knee after surgery  PT video – knee on ball, massage	We can share all kinds of experiences, joy and pain.  I think I started to understand just by looking.  My mom struggled through physical therapy and tried to keep up with her exercises for a while, but they never really caught on. She still likes to imagine what it would be like to have perfect knees.	Therapy ambience  Treadmill	Piano improv #2
	07:47			
A7	PT cont'd – on bike, w/ skeleton, walking w/ cane	If ever there were a fantasy I had through the years and will continue to have, about what it would be like when you die and go to heaven and everything's perfect, my fantasy has to do with being able to run. Being able to use my knees and my legs and run through space and not be afraid.	bells	
	08:17			
B9	Climbing stairs	Still, she'll admit she can do a few things better now than she used to be able to.	Footsteps on pavement	

	Ballet video archival	I think it's natural that I want my mom to have the joy of movement she's always dreamed about. But maybe, as her daughter, there's something else I can do better.	traffic Bells contd	
	08:36			
B1 0	Patio video – walk across	Even now I can tell my joints are creakier than they used to be. I know that eventually I'll get old and dancing will be hard, maybe impossible. Maybe I'll have a knee replaced. Most certainly I will die.  But not yet.		Disco mix
	09:13			
T2	Animation  Skeleton re-forms heart and veins, is lifted to feet.  Skeleton and woman turn into stars.			
	10:20			
	Credits			Disco mix

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Mothers' Milk Bank at Austin. <http://www.mmbaustin.org>

Texas Filmmakers' Production Fund <http://www.austinfilm.org/tfpf>

## Vita

Madeleine Ruth Akers (“Mattie”) was born September 7, 1981 to Regeana McMinn Akers and Mark Norman Akers, in Austin, Texas. She attended Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, from 1999-2003, studying abroad in Paris during the spring of 2002. After graduating from Brown she returned to Austin, where she worked as an associate producer on the feature documentary, *The Unforeseen* (Laura Dunn, 2007) and held several other jobs to pay the bills. In the fall of 2006, she entered the graduate program for film/video production at the University of Texas at Austin.

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