

## **Rick Minnich & Matt Sweetwood**

**present their documentary *Forgetting Dad* (2009)**

**Potsdam/Germany, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2010**

**MATT SWEETWOOD:** Here we are. Thank you for coming.

**RICK MINNICH:** He's Matt. I'm Rick.

**SWEETWOOD:** I'm Matt. You might know that because I wasn't in the film. The beginning of this film was something interesting because Rick happened to be the first American filmmaker I met here. I live in Potsdam. I've been here for fifteen years now. Our first meeting was at Sehsüchte [student film festival in Potsdam].

**MINNICH:** He actually came and saw a film of mine, and introduced himself afterwards. It was this weird moment where I said, "What are *you* doing here?" And he said, "What are *you* doing here?" We quickly discovered that we have a few things in common.

**SWEETWOOD:** German wives.

**MINNICH:** Two Americans here with German wives. We totally understand the other person's situation.

**SWEETWOOD:** So we knew we had to stick together. That's the point. And you need to stick together in this. Then we started the hillbilly film [*Homemade Hillbilly Jam*], which is also close to home because I grew up in Missouri, near the Ozarks. That was the film he was making about 'What is a hillbilly?' It turned out to be a beautiful rockumentary. It's playing tonight. You should stick around if you like folksy music.

**MINNICH:** Matt kind of saved the film. I had shot it when he and his family were living in the US. They went back for a few years. He actually helped us on one of our shoots near Kansas City. I came back here and burned through two German editors, who didn't quite get what I was trying to say with the film. Hillbilly music is kind of special, and they didn't get it. Then Matt and his family moved back here. First I just showed him some footage, then he dug into it, and understood what I was trying to say but couldn't figure out how to.

We started touring around the US with that film, and took an HDV camera, sound equipment and some lights with us. Officially we were going on a research trip for *Forgetting Dad*. We didn't have all the funding yet, and weren't supposed to be spending any money. Our potential funders weren't supposed to know we were over there filming, and all that. I don't know if the research ever ended or when the research ended and the filming began. It all got mixed together.

**SWEETWOOD:** But I do remember he began with this idea that he'd already started like you see in the film. He came to me and said, "I want you to meet my dad. I think it would be a really interesting film." And he started telling me about it. It did already begin back here in Potsdam. We spent many nights talking about how the film could go. This is where the writing begins. You don't know if you're writing or not, but suddenly you realize you are writing everything down. I still prefer little index cards.

**MINNICH:** *Lots* of them on a big table.

**SWEETWOOD:** And you need a really big table. Then we started with him just telling me about his family. It's a strange thing because you're talking about people who are just fictitious people: my mom, there's Anne and Jan, my sisters. There's Justin and all these people. So I just wrote out their names on cards. We started figuring out how we could cast them into this film and finding the story and structure. He called it an 'amazing recovery' story because in the early phase he thought his dad was actually recovering quite

well. And he really wanted to show how his dad had overcome those huge odds. He became a paperboy, he learned how to speak.

**MINNICH:** I actually started shooting that film kind of on my own about ten years after his amnesia began. That was the film that got funded, at least that's when our first funder ZDF got involved. But then my dad suddenly didn't want to be filmed anymore, which I tell about midway through the film. Chronologically in the process it occurred much earlier, before Matt got involved. We were confronted with the situation that I was supposed to make a film about my father's miraculous recovery, but he didn't want to be filmed anymore. So we kind of had a problem.

**SWEETWOOD:** It was a unique problem that became my problem.

**MINNICH:** It wasn't quite as lonely having someone with me then.

**SWEETWOOD:** It was a real challenge. How do you tell this kind of story? I've made different kinds of films. I've edited different types of films. This was the third personal documentary I've edited. I think there are similarities. It's always a personal 'Innenreise' ['interior journey'] as they say in German. German's got a lot of great words.

**MINNICH:** It's like an internal journey.

**SWEETWOOD:** It's a road movie in your head basically. What's your plot? What am I actually doing? How can I tell this story? Is it the 'miraculous recovery' story, a whodunnit, or did he fake it or not? The story was thrown upon us while we were making it.

**MINNICH:** It happened on the first shooting day, actually.

**SWEETWOOD:** It happened, but it wasn't what we expected. In the beginning, I was trying to figure out who his family was and why you wanted to make this into a film. So in a lot of ways, I was playing sort of devil's advocate, and was saying things like, "Is this really going to make an interesting story?"

**MINNICH:** Will anyone care?

**SWEETWOOD:** Will anyone want to watch this? Not to hurt his feelings or anything like that but it was more like how do we tell this story? You have to keep track of that process. I would keep reminding him: "Well, you told me earlier about this person ..." It was good to start writing things down.

Then there's always this point when you're beginning to film. We went there to visit his mom. You can tell them about the first day filming. We officially went over. We had the camera. The first interview was with his mom, where she got out the box of photos. You can tell them how it went. It was our first interview. Everything was theoretical. And suddenly we had a real situation.

**MINNICH:** We'd just been following her around the house a little bit. Then we said, okay, let's do a little sit-down interview. We set up a lamp, and put the camera on the tripod. She started looking through this box, and was finding old photos and telling stories. Then she found this letter. She saw the postmark on it, and said, "Oh, your dad wrote this to me in 1991, so this was pretty close to when he had his accident." It all happened live in front of the camera. It was one of those moments when as a documentary filmmaker you just kind of get blown out of the water because something happens live on camera that you really had no idea was going to happen. And we captured it all. We were looking at each other, and it was like, "What was that?" And my mom turns over the letter and poses this question, "Well how did he write this letter?"

It set off a lot of things in my head because he wrote me lots of letters the first year of his amnesia, and I had never thought about how he wrote them. As I narrate early in the film, I was just always interested in what he was trying to say to me, and what was going on with him emotionally. But the fact that, according to what his doctors were saying about him, he should not have been able to write those letters never crossed my mind until we filmed that scene with my mom fifteen years after his amnesia started.

So that really cast a sense of doubt or put this very uneasy feeling in me that has never gone away. It became the dominant feeling of the whole shoot, which went on for two years. We took three trips over two years.

**SWEETWOOD:** At that point, from my position – if you were helping Rick in this ‘How do I tell the story?’ – now we had her character on the card, which reads ‘Karen, my mother.’ Does she believe him or not? How does she feel about him? Then you start doing the math. Here’s the first person. How does she feel about it? You really get to know the character. We didn’t know how the other people would be. We had this thing that we had to go meet your dad. That was a big adventure. But the real question became: “Do I believe him or not?” Or: “Is he lying? How do I feel about him?” Sometimes it poses really difficult questions because you need it for the story. You need to know if they’re going to become a contributor to the film or not. But it takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of him [Rick] processing how he felt at that moment.

So a lot of the filming was sometimes very difficult because it was like: “Wow. I just heard this. I never knew this.” Does this belong in the film? Is it part of the research? With every week or every day, the family story would get more and more confusing and difficult to follow.

**MINNICH:** It just so happened that on that first trip when we filmed that scene with my mother, we filmed a couple of other things in Kansas with old family friends, stuff that didn’t make it into the film. And then we flew to Oregon. We’d arranged to go see my dad. He lives in this little town that has the second oldest continuously operated movie theatre in the United States. And they organized a screening of *Homemade Hillbilly Jam* while we were there. It was over Halloween, and I was hoping they’d go to a Halloween party and we could film something with them. I really wanted Matt to just meet my dad because if you’re going to make this film, you have to have had the ‘Richard experience.’

**SWEETWOOD:** So we could film his amazing recovery. So he could show us what it was like. And then there was the big question: “What do you remember?” That was on our list of questions.

**MINNICH:** I was really hoping that maybe if my father met someone from my world – a friend of mine, someone I work with – then maybe we could get him to understand that this film might not be such a frightening, horrible thing, and that we could get him and his wife to open up a little bit. And as it turned out, we did travel around a bit. They gave us a tour of the town. We had the camera with us, and we shot some footage where it was clear that he didn’t want to be filmed. Then we shot that Halloween scene with the masks. We also had a little one-chip mini-DV camera, really a toy camera, with us. We played around with it. They were really curious and asked: “Oh, can you make movies with that camera that are good enough to show on TV?” And we were like: “No, no, it’s just a toy.” We ended up shooting that Halloween stuff kind of for fun, and it turned out to be some of the creepiest footage we had of him with his mask on there.

Why don’t you say something about what it was like to be around my father?

**SWEETWOOD:** Considering the previous days of what I’d learned from his mother, and now looking at this big task of making this film and all this stuff, I couldn’t help but try to catch him in a moment where I thought: “Is it...?” I mean, I’ve never met someone with amnesia, so I thought to myself: Should I just experience him or should I try to really look into his inner conscience or whatever and figure out if he was performing or not? I then began realizing that there are things about him that are really strange. At that point he basically said to us, “I don’t want to be filmed. This is not a film about me. This is a film about you.” How did he put it? “You can take all the movies and the photos and stuff, but I don’t want to be involved in this project.”

**MINNICH:** He never said we can’t make the film. He just didn’t want to be a part of it.

**SWEETWOOD:** And the way that he communicated that to us was in a very esoteric, New Age sort of way.

**MINNICH:** It took him about an hour to tell us that.

**SWEETWOOD:** Very slow and very drawn out and very difficult to follow. Again, faced with the challenge that we were there to make this documentary, it became a matter of what to do now. It became a whole different story. Now you started to ask me, which began the process of the film, “What do we do now? What do we do with Richard? How do we do this? How are we going to make a film about him if he’s not in it?”

**MINNICH:** Around this point, we hit that point of no return where we were in it and enough money had been spent that there was no turning back. I think we had the rest of the funding by this point. After that trip to Oregon, Matt cut together this very good trailer out of this footage that I think kind of convinced the funders who were still on the fence at that point. It was very clear to everyone that this was going to be a real challenge because we’ve got this film about a guy we’re never going to see on camera today. All we’re going to have is all this archival footage and people talking about him.

But during that trip to my dad, after this very bizarre conversation when he said, “Maybe this is not about me; It’s about all of you,” that set off something in my head. At first it felt like he was slapping me on the face. It was like, oh, man, he’s rejecting me again! Or refusing to be filmed again.

Then Matt and I went out and had a few drinks, and sat in the car freezing, drinking some beer in the snow. We had a tape recorder because we were recording our whole working process. We were filming each other, and making audio recordings and stuff, and went, “Wow! What was that?” Then it dawned on me that maybe he was giving us a clue. And this clue was to turn the camera away from him and onto my family, which is what we did. I basically hadn’t talked to my step-mother in about ten years. I thought of her as my ‘evil’ step-mother, and didn’t think she’d handled the situation with my father well at all. We had just never been best buddies or anything. But I sort of swallowed my pride and took up my relationship to her again.

One of my little brothers was graduating from high school, so it was a good family occasion to get together. She and my step-sister Lora and I ended up staying up really late that night and talked and talked and talked. And at that point, I realized that something very strange was going on because almost everything they were saying contradicted what my father had been telling me all these years about his amnesia. It was this weird game because I’m his son from his first marriage, and felt a certain loyalty towards him. But what they were telling me seemed much more logical and much more rational and much more realistic than all the stuff that my father had told me. This put me in a real dilemma as a son. And as a filmmaker, I was just like, “Oh, my God, what do we do?” That was another one of those moments where it was very nice having Matt by my side because not being a member of the family, he had a totally different outlook on the ‘facts’ or the stories that people were telling me. He was able to analyze them in a different way than I was.

**SWEETWOOD:** So we had ‘Loretta - evil step-mother’ on one card. She was basically the one who made it difficult for Rick in the early phases of Richard’s recovery and stuff. So we had a whole different set of questions for her. Then, as you can see in the film, the son and mother relationship that they never had all started from scratch as we were filming.

These are things that would slowly start to change. I would just write down everything and keep it all going. But the real problem when you’re filming a documentary is that you need time to process all this. It’s really difficult when you’re hearing stories you’ve never heard before and it’s really emotional. We always had a plane ticket back to Berlin, and we had to show our funders something when we came back. Our commissioning editor from ZDF Christian Cloos and our producer Olaf Jacobs wanted to know what we were doing over there. They wanted to know what was going on with the miraculous recovering story.

**MINNICH:** All that annoying, practical, business side of filmmaking stuff.

**SWEETWOOD:** And you can’t just say: “We just had an epiphany. Lora turns out to be a pretty cool person.” I know it says in the story that she’s the mean-

**MINNICH:** The horrible step-sister-

**SWEETWOOD:** ... the horrible step-sister, but actually she’s turned out to be pretty cool. So you need the structure, but you also have to be ready to throw it away and start anew. By the second trip, we realized

that certain people were going to have bigger roles. Lora was good. She had a lot to tell. And Justin. Even Loretta and your sisters. In the end, history will be kind to me because I wrote it, or in this case because I spoke up and actually had something to say.

There were a lot of good stories along the way and a lot of interesting people, but there's no way you can put them on screen because they fulfill only one function. It's a really weird thing to have to say: "I know you're interesting, but you don't have a function in the film." You can't tell them that.

**MINNICH:** We filmed a lot more with my one sister, but she ended up having less screen time than her twin sister, and I don't think she's forgiven me to this day for it. She's always asking: "What about all that footage you shot with me?"

**SWEETWOOD:** And when you put the camera in front of them, it just comes out like a waterfall. We had all our questions: "How do you feel about this?" It was a strange thing for me. Maybe it's a unique **MINNICH** family thing, but you put a camera in front of them and they have so much to tell. When I was shooting, my arm was falling off like this. It was a two-hour interview – the one in the bedroom. And you ask yourself: When do you say: 'Cut'? When is it enough? This is a unique thing because you can't cut someone off. They're telling their life story. They've bottled this up for years. The camera's rolling, and they're talking and talking and talking.

**MINNICH:** That was something I wasn't quite sure that I could expect. With some relatives, like my step-mother, I wasn't sure if they would talk at all. So much time's gone by. Does anyone even want to talk about this anymore? But it turned out in every single case to be the exact opposite. It was this weird thing in my rather large, extended family that everyone wanted to talk about but no one knew how to. Then we came along.

They're used to me having a camera all the time, and taking pictures and videotaping. But now I was coming with a friend and the specific purpose of trying to find answers for the family and trying to solve the mystery of my father's amnesia. And they were thankful in a lot of ways. They were really gushing out, and sometimes it was hard to direct them, so to speak.

**SWEETWOOD:** What do we do with all this information? Many of you have done long interviews, and there's always this question of: How much time do you spend watching them and what do I do with all these interviews? How do I transcribe them? How long do I let the camera roll? Sometimes if you really focus and you have just one or two questions, you create an environment where you can just set the camera down, get them talking and let it roll. If you discipline yourself to do that, you get some of the best footage. We were experimenting, but then Axel [Schneppat] came along and started shooting. It was no longer this little HDV camera but a big HDCAM camera-

**MINNICH:** And a big light.

**SWEETWOOD:** And we were afraid this would totally change this feeling we had with the family. It had been some kind of personal catharsis, and then we showed up with some big equipment.

**MINNICH:** We weren't sleeping on the floor at the house anymore. We were staying in a hotel, and it became a very formal situation. But it had its good sides because we realized that some of the interview situations were very concentrated, very focused, very well-lit. Axel always says you have to be able to see the people's eyes. It was difficult because in this one long interview we'd shot with Loretta on our first trip you couldn't see her eyes very well. She has these really dark eyes. But we were able to fix it a little in the color correction.

When Axel came along, it changed the whole dynamics, and it wasn't this sort of dialogue thing Matt and I had had going on between us. Axel brought in a certain epic quality. He shot all the footage in San Francisco, the opening sequence. He shot the trip to Oregon at the end of the film, the waves, all these more abstract landscape shots, and some of the more formal interview situations. He shot all that stuff that has a real clean, crisp, decisive feel to it.

**SWEETWOOD:** And I shot the things like the argument scene between Justin and his girlfriend Crystal in the empty apartment, and when Steve came. We could react to these situations better [as a two-man crew]. We had to create an environment where we were prepared to react at any time. So there's pros and cons. There are pros to shooting very light, just two people. You have the camera ready to go and shoot. And on the other hand this concentrated look [with a bigger crew].

When we got back to the editing room, this is where I think 70 percent of the film that you just saw sort of happened. We went through all the footage and broke it down and asked ourselves: "What actually happened?"

**MINNICH:** We knew by this point that it wasn't going to be this miraculous recovery story. But I remember Matt saying over and over again: "Is this the story of your father's amnesia? Is he faking it or not? Or is this the story of what happened to his family as a result of it?" It was like an 'either/or' type of thing. And I remember insisting that we could tell both stories, and trying to find a way we could do it. This took a long time. We were making this film, for better or worse, with a company which pretty much exclusively does TV documentaries, and they thought: six weeks for a rough cut and two weeks for a fine cut, then it's over and the film's done. Then after six weeks, we weren't anywhere close to having any kind of rough cut. It dragged on and on and on. But at some point we figured out that we could interweave these stories, and that the link was going to be me either filling in the gaps of what's going on with certain factual things or my reacting to situations. I would have a voice-over that would have different types of functions. We could bring in my family and how they felt about certain things. And at the same time, we could chronologically tell the story of my father's amnesia and how it progressed. It really helped toward the end when we added these title cards – 'one week after amnesia', 'six months after amnesia', etc. It made it clear to viewers that this story is being told chronologically.

**SWEETWOOD:** But the point was that in the storytelling, we chose a sort of 'whodunnit' story. It was awkward for me to suggest this, but it seemed to me that – and I don't know if you felt this while watching the film – if you start to feel like you're one of the family members, and you're figuring out at what point do I believe him or not. But it's also difficult when it's your father, when it's a family member, to figure out if he's really doing this or not.

So we started chronologically, focusing on at what point is it believable and at what point is it not believable? At one point you think to yourself: It could be that. Sometimes I have my own feelings about Richard and who he was and what this is, but I had to put these aside because in the story you need to develop the sensation that it 'could be'. I don't know at what point you as an audience felt that he was definitely faking it or at what point you felt this wasn't about faking it, but that he's got a serious, serious psychological problem. It could be physical, but I'm curious to find out how he's actually dealing with this and how the family is dealing with it.

So you have different levels, but still you have a general level of understanding that at one point it will come to this question where Rick actually has to confront him [his father]. This wasn't really plotted out on paper, but the doctors' reports – this McGuffin that we used in the plot to say, 'If we found out what the doctors said ...' – then we would have the information, which functions like a plot tool. In a lot of ways, it does have a clear structure. But again, how much do you know and not know is something difficult in documentary because you can't shut off your brain. You can't say: "Okay, I don't know this. What do we leave out?" There are big scenes where he [Richard] went to check out books on amnesia in the library, while at the same time he was checking out kids' books. We had that story in and out of the film I don't know how many times.

**MINNICH:** A lot.

**SWEETWOOD:** There was a doctor's report where the doctor said: "This case is the rarest of the rare." But the minute you see Dr. Spiegel from Stanford talking in his doctor way, you're suddenly completely out of the personal discovery. So in order to say, "Okay, this is a personal discovery. It may be sloppy in some ways. No one really has time to go talk to doctors. But this is the story of how the family experiences it." It took forever to get that framework. But then you can start telling the story. It probably took three months of editing to get to that point.

**MINNICH:** We edited for over a year, but we weren't in the editing room every day. The entire process took over a year. But that's right, we did try having the doctors in the film, but then it went off in a different direction. That's one of the reasons why the film hasn't done well in the US. I've been told by the TV people there that they want to have experts on amnesia in the film. And they want to have an on-screen encounter with my father at the end.

**SWEETWOOD:** They wanted us to attack him. They wanted us to go in with the camera-

**MINNICH:** -and bang on his door.

**SWEETWOOD:** We've been really criticized for that. Why didn't we just go in and confront him in the classic way and go in and say, "Come on, tell us why you're doing this."

**MINNICH:** That was a unique challenge during the editing process because we knew all along that we couldn't take another trip. We couldn't get him on camera. How are we going to end this story? And curiously enough, as soon as I was looking at the rushes and saw that last shot of the reflection of the snowy mountains on the lake, I knew instantly that that was the final shot. We roughly cut together that final scene pretty early in the process. We didn't know how we were going to get there, but we wrote some narration and recorded it. We had a microphone in the editing room, and were constantly re-recording narration. It was easy because we could record it directly into the timeline and have it instantly to work with.

We knew that a lot of people were going to be disappointed because we weren't going to be able to deliver the goods at the end. We were not going to be able to deliver this living, breathing person who calls himself 'New Richard'. We didn't have him on camera, so how are we going to deal with this situation?

**SWEETWOOD:** But I think that turns out to be the strength somehow because that's the feeling that you have. You never really get to see him. You never get to experience him. He's gone. He's not there anymore. The 'Old Richard' is gone. At what point do you turn those things into the strengths of the film? You sort of have to say, "Well, that's the way life is."

**MINNICH:** It really helped once we had our composer Ari [Benjamin Meyers] involved. He was involved from very early on. When he gave us that music, and we knew it was going to be the music at the end, I knew we could play on my ambivalent feelings about still not getting this black and white answer that I'd always wanted, and trying to come to terms with that on some kind of a storytelling level that leaves a certain feeling in the audience. It's strange that it's worked for audiences all around the world on some level. It's a feeling of relating to this sense of uncertainty which remains in my family.

**SWEETWOOD:** The final thing that I was learning about how you write a story that has no ending is that every day the phone would ring, an email would come, new facts would come. You were constantly bombarded in the same way when you're thinking: "How can I end my story? He could do this. He could do that." It was even worse. I've written fiction stories. I've thought about multiple endings for many different things. But when you have the situation of not being able to edit for another two weeks, and then new facts are coming in and constantly mounting and mounting and mounting, you have to really say: Okay, the film is what we experienced, what Rick experienced during that trip in that year and how he felt at that time, and just create a poignant end because it all leads to this one emotion – that feeling of never getting close to him. We could say a lot of other things happened. Was it untruthful to leave those things out? Was it irresponsible for us to avoid certain aspects? We'll have to live with that. But when you're writing a story where you really know in the end that it's all about how Rick experiences loss, then you have to shut down all those other people who are calling and writing and saying, "Well, you could do it like this. You could do it like that. Or what if he does it this way?" For Rick, that was a really difficult decision because it means taking a stance: How do I feel?

I have a lot to learn from Rick and to thank him for because he taught me a lot about how to shape your ideas and how to deal with people. But at the end of the day, when you make a film that's so personal like that, it's somehow permanent. Even though it was just a small snapshot of his life and how he

experienced it, now he has a different relationship with his family and even his father. But how much do you put that into the film? This is an ongoing process; the story never ends. You just have to create an end.

**MINNICH:** I was very hesitant to let go with this film. I could have probably gone on editing for even longer. Actually, we got to a point where Matt was kind of like: "If you want to make any more changes, do it on your own." He left me alone for a while. I started trying out a few things. Then I reached this point where I realized that it was only making the film worse. And then finally I said, "Okay, we're done." And then we went back to the last version that we finished together.

I kept thinking this big light was going to go on, and I was going to have some great answer, some epiphany or something, and it didn't happen. But I was able to say, "Okay, let's stop." It wasn't too long after that that we got into IDFA [International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam], and we had certain deadlines. We needed to mix the film. So I was able to close it.

We did a few festivals together, and then I was kind of on my own after that. I wasn't quite sure what to expect from showing the film publicly, but I was secretly hoping that at some point I would have an epiphany after all, and that the process of sharing my family's story with others would be cathartic. It has, to some degree, but it also raised new issues I hadn't expected.

After the film was shown on television in Finland, a neurologist from Helsinki wrote me to tell me that my father had been misdiagnosed. She was convinced that he's not mentally ill, but has physical damage to his brain – a diffuse axonal injury, which is typical of whiplash cases. She said a lot of people are misdiagnosed for insurance purposes because a proper diagnosis would be very expensive. Other doctors contacted me with similar stories. It was all very confusing.

I went back and showed the film to my family, except to my father, who doesn't want to see me. They were very emotional about it. My step-mother Loretta, my step-sister Lora and my brother Justin were very excited about it because they felt like their voices were finally being heard. They felt like all these years it had been suggested that they were the crazy ones, and everyone was always sympathizing with my father, and no one was paying attention to what was really going on in their household on a daily basis. Justin, in particular, was really, really excited. The next day he brought over some of his friends to watch the film, and he just kept saying: "Look, all these things really happened. That stuff really happened; everything I've been telling you all these years really happened." He felt like no one believed him. How do you tell other kids at school that your dad has amnesia? He was eight at the time, and instantly became a social outcast as a result of it. Their whole family life fell apart. My dad was like a zombie walking around town and acting like a child or being childlike in a 45-year-old body.

**SWEETWOOD:** So in that way, do you feel like your family's come around? And how do they relate to Richard now?

**MINNICH:** Some have a relationship to him and some don't. The ones who do are generally somehow financially dependent upon him. The source of his sudden apparent wealth remains sort of a mystery. Whether he really did have money hidden away like my mother and Steve suggested in other scenes that are not in the film I still don't know. Steve talked about how he opened the desk drawers once and found five checkbooks from all these bank accounts my father had. My mother told the same story that my father had all these secret bank accounts. We also know that his new wife Tracy comes from a wealthy family so maybe it's all from her. I don't know. Whatever. He has helped out some of my siblings financially here and there, and they're the ones who still have some kind of relationship with him.

**SWEETWOOD:** Maybe we should stop talking for a little bit. That was a lot about what was going on behind the scenes. I don't know if you have any questions for Rick or for myself about the process of making a personal documentary and how to grab the bull by the horns and make it all clean and nice in the end.

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** Hello. I have a question about when you decided to go with Justin to see your father. Was that during the first trip?



**MINNICH:** Actually, we had a totally different plan. It was on the third trip when we had Axel, our cameraman, and the heavy equipment. We knew this was our last trip. It was the big trip, the longest trip. My one sister who has the smaller role in the finished film but the one we filmed a lot with negotiated with my father that she and I would go visit him. He would see me if she was there because they have a good relationship. But what happened was that there was a big snowstorm, and my sister was afraid to go up there because she thought we'd get stuck and she wouldn't be able to get back by Monday to go to work and stuff. So what happened instead is that Justin and I showed up. It wasn't only Justin and I, but we had a film team with us. So my father was furious. He said I lied to him and all this and that, which just complicated matters even more.

I didn't go up there thinking that we'd really get to film with him. I wanted to document the experience that Justin and I had of going up there. I was curious what was going to happen to us. And Justin kind of fell into that role because before that final shoot, I was living in Los Angeles for a month, and he came to visit me and broke his leg while he was there. He was totally immobile. On the previous shoots, we would spend days trying to find him in San Francisco because he would just disappear. And now we had him, so we were trying to film a lot with him despite the continuity problems of his having a broken leg or not having a broken leg.

So we took that trip up to Oregon. He was very calm, and couldn't run around with his cast on his leg. I'm sure the drugs played a role, too, in his being so mellow.

My father felt very provoked by the whole situation. And like I describe in that final scene, Justin and I were so shocked at seeing our father when he took us out to breakfast that morning that there was no way that I could have possibly filmed him or even taken a photo of him because he just looked so horrible. He really looked like a corpse: very pale, very gaunt, his cheeks sucked in. He was very, very frightened of us. When we got back to the hotel, Justin said to me: "We would have been real assholes to have provoked him or to have even asked any tough questions because it would have been like kicking somebody who's already lying on the ground." That was part of the reason why I said, okay, we're not going to have that shot that a lot of viewers are going to want to have. It was the son in me rather than the director who made that decision. I just said: Okay, the son says I don't want to show my father this way. To me, he still feels like my father even though he claims to be a different person, or is a different person in his eyes, whatever the situation is, and I didn't want to show him that way.

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** That was really the end of your journey.

**MINNICH:** That was the very end. Then we went back to California. It took us about eighteen hours to drive back there. We filmed a little scene in the desert on the way back, and Justin and I got in a little fight. It didn't make it into the film, but I think it will be bonus material for the DVD. We also filmed some interesting stuff in the old neighborhood where my father lived when the accident happened. But again, it was Justin walking around on his crutches, meeting old neighbors and stuff, and it didn't move the story forward. It just didn't work.

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** Thank you very much.

**WOMAN IN AUDIENCE:** As a conclusion, how do you consider your father today? Do you think he is guilty or is he a victim?

**MINNICH:** That's something I still can't answer. The only thing I really know is that something did definitely change inside his head which led to a personality change. I still don't know whether this car accident really caused it and if there's physical damage to his brain. He doesn't let anyone talk to his doctors or see his medical records. So the only information we have besides those records that my step-sister found is what I hear from my siblings who still talk to him, or what I hear from my aunt and uncle. Sometimes they tell me something, and it's just all so confusing. It's like what I narrate at the end of the film about severed synapses in his brain stem or something. When I talk to doctors, they just roll their eyes. Most are skeptical. There are some like these Finnish and Swedish doctors who say that this really does happen the way that he describes what happened to him. It really does happen.

If it weren't for his very questionable past, especially those last years leading up to his amnesia, I would be much more inclined to believe everything he's told me. But he just had a lot of reasons for not

wanting to stay the person he was before. One of my favorite scenes, not only because she's my mother, but because she conveys the feeling very well, is when she talks about it being a gut feeling that she has. She keeps repeating: "It's just a gut feeling." And she had it from the very moment that she saw him for the first time as the 'New Richard', and sensed that something wasn't right about it all.

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** I think it's actually quite useful that you didn't have that big shot at the end and confronted him with the camera. I think it's better that it plays out the way it does. It's much more thought-provoking. I'll go home and not feel like I just watched a reality show. You know what I mean? I can somehow understand him because after all, he's going to be on television all over the globe, and maybe he doesn't want his life given to that.

**SWEETWOOD:** That was always an ethical question, too. Do you love your father? Did it seem like we were attacking him by poking around in his story? Is this important for other people to see? Is there a universal theme? A lot of people have loss. A lot of people have conflicts with their fathers. In that way, it's a catharsis. In a lot of ways, it's documenting the voices of a family that have been very much controlled by Richard. This gut feeling: this is this feeling that he's affected their lives, but their stories have not been discussed or taken into account. So in a way, it's the sum of these feelings. Yet does it justify exposing him in this way?

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** He's off in a sphere of his own.

**MINNICH:** This ethical issue was a very big problem for me. But at some point, I felt a stronger obligation to the rest of my family than I did to my father. And I thought: everyone wants to talk, every single person in my family except for my father and his current wife. Every single person wanted to talk and every single person really supported what we were doing. I took that as a sign. In sheer numbers, I felt like I was in the majority somehow. I also knew that my father was an *absolute* control freak before, and he *still* is that way, and the more time that goes by, the more he has become like his former self. When someone brings up that issue, it drives him nuts. It's another one of those things that gives the feeling in my family that he's either putting this on or his memories have returned and he's trying to hide that fact. My sisters and I tend toward that theory that a lot of memories did come back at some point, and it's created a real personality conflict for him. And his way of dealing with it is to keep the lid on and stay 100 percent in this 'New Richard' role the best he can. Part of that was moving far away from everyone. It's extremely difficult to get to where he lives.

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** You made it clear that he didn't want to have anything to do with the film. But do you know if he's seen the finished film or do you know from your siblings who are in touch with him how he feels about the film's success, that it's traveling around the world and so on?

**MINNICH:** I don't know how much he knows about what's been going on with the film. We have a website and stuff. I'm sure he could figure it out if he wanted to. He could just google his name and he'd be everywhere.

I saw him again six months after that final scene. I was traveling around with one of my kids, and we went and visited him. He said, "Don't come." But my sister was there with her kids, and I wanted to get the cousins together. He threatened to break off our relationship if I showed up, but I didn't take his threat seriously. That was the last I heard from him. That was three years ago.

For a year, I kept writing him and calling him, but never got a response. So I gave up on it. Then a few months ago, my step-father died, my mother's second husband. We shot a beautiful scene with him, which also ended up on the cutting room floor. He raised me from my twelfth year on, so he was a very important person in my life. We were on really good terms when he died. I felt like I was at peace with my relationship with my step-father the way he died at that point in my life, and I felt a really strong urge to try to find this kind of peace with my father.

So I wrote him again, not expecting an answer. But curiously enough he wrote back a couple of days later. In typical fashion, it was a six-page email that was kind of like that conversation we had with him that one night: very difficult to understand and full of accusations. As we got more and more into the filming, he accused me of turning the family against him, and spreading rumors about him in the family.

Apparently our filming was affecting the relationships that some of my siblings and other members of the family had with him, and he felt that we were spreading this horrible information about him. It's kind of hard to know if he's just paranoid. It's hard to know exactly what people were telling him.

He has not seen the film. I have not felt comfortable with sending it to him. I don't know if he'd watch it. I would much prefer to go visit him and show it to him, but he's still not willing to meet with me.

He's sixty-five now, and he's in pretty bad health. He had a heart attack a few years ago, and it's lead to a lot of complications, also with his brain stem. It raises all these issues once again about his story of what happened in the car accident.

**MODERATOR SACHIKO SCHMIDT:** Since it's a crucial part in the development of the film that your father decides that he doesn't want to be on camera anymore, I'm wondering: You as a filmmaker, in your family you obviously picked up your job pretty early. There are cameras in the footage. Also your father had a camera. Tell us a little more about that. Is that also an interesting point that your father became conscious about your being a filmmaker and not just the person who says you're his son?

**MINNICH:** It took me ten years to get to the point where I consciously made the decision to make this film. When I told my father about it – I went and visited him and his wife when they still lived in California – they were really excited about it. I filmed with them in their garden. The scene of them with their big hats on in the garden is from that trip. I filmed them singing in front of the fireplace and Tracy playing her guitar and stuff like that. I thought this was going to be the 'miraculous recovery story.'

I returned to Berlin, then a couple of months later I got this letter saying they didn't want to have anything to do with it anymore, which just blew me out of the water. I didn't understand what their problem was. For two years, I kept trying to get some kind of explanation from him, and they would just say: "Oh, we want our private life to remain private" or something else that didn't sound like a real explanation. It wasn't until a couple of years later when I was visiting him in Oregon for the very first time – without Matt – that we went on a walk together, and it kind of slipped out of him. He refused to see a psychiatrist like that story that my grandmother tells in the film, but he did see this therapist for about ten years. He called her 'Mom.' They had a very strange relationship. I met her a couple of times, and he always called her 'Mom.' Well 'Mom' told him that this film might cause more harm than good. When that slipped out of his mouth, I knew immediately from having observed him and this 'Mom' together that anything this woman told him to do he would do. So I knew that was the simple explanation: 'Mom' said no. She obviously knew what was going on with him. She'd offered to talk to me whenever I wanted. Then when it became clear that we were making this film, she totally refused to have any contact with me at all. I've been tempted to send her the film, but what's the point. That would just be provoking her.

Any other questions? We're happy to talk.

**MODERATOR SACHIKO SCHMIDT:** Maybe one last question. Returning to the aesthetics of the film, there are scenes that you re-enacted. Was that always something you planned to have in the film? Or when did you decide to do that?

**MINNICH:** We talked about that because there were certain story elements we knew were crucial. We didn't quite know how to do them. The central one is that tape recorder scene. We had a couple others with some floppy disks and this whole story about my father wanting his computer back. Pretty strange stuff. We did shoot some more of that re-enactment type stuff, and realized that it became too much of the same. It was so bizarre that it took the legitimacy out of the story. It made it seem unreal although these were all stories that people told us that seemed to be real. It was just too much.

We did one shoot here in Berlin and Potsdam with that doctor and with the tape recorder with a different cameraman. It was one day of re-enactments. I've never done anything like that before. We knew it could be really cheesy, and wanted to find some aesthetic way to do it that isn't quite so cheesy. Some people like it, some people don't. That's par for the course.

What was really important to me and what we talked about many times is trying to find this universal level to the story. We knew this also had a lot to do with the aesthetics and making the film feel big, and not just having mini-DV or HDV or some other small format and always just staying close up to people when they're running around and more reality TV-type stuff. We wanted to have this big, epic feeling to it. A lot of this had to do with the kind of epic photography that Axel did, like going down this hill

in San Francisco in the beginning, and having this orchestral music. That was an old dream of mine to have an orchestra and have a composer involved from the very beginning. I knew that some people would find it way too much, and some do. But I felt that if I was going to tell an intensely personal story, I knew it was the kind of film you only do once in a lifetime, if ever, so I threw everything out there and said: Okay, let's go for it, and see what happens.

I know when I go to the movie theater and pay to see a film, I want to have an emotional experience. I think documentaries should do the same thing that fiction films do: they should give the viewer an emotional experience on that same level, regardless of the production quality. It's the emotional experience that matters. I think Matt and I worked really, really hard, and Matt was very crucial in making that happen with this film in taking out a lot of stuff that was interesting to me, but that he knew wasn't going to be interesting to other people. So I'm really thankful that Matt took some potentially embarrassing stuff out of the film. And I hope it did something for you.

**SWEETWOOD:** Do you want to tell them about the Chinese fortune teller? No?

**MINNICH:** One last thing.

**SWEETWOOD:** Rick was so desperate that he went to a Chinese fortune teller in San Francisco. Do you remember what he told you?

**MINNICH:** Yes.

**SWEETWOOD:** And we did film that. We actually put it at the beginning of the film, but it sort of gave away the ending. But in the end, I'd just like to say that if you're going to make a personal documentary, don't do it alone. The second thing: write everything down in case someone tries to sue you. [laughs] No. You should keep a record, but don't be afraid to experiment with genres. The feature film idea with the crime story somehow seemed to work with this film. In the end, I think that with every film you learn. With every film you take away a new thing. Some films go on and on. We're really happy to show it [*Forgetting Dad*] here, that people are interested in this story. It was controversial. There was a debate about whether we should even show the film. Are we making him into a monster? Is he a victim? Should we leave him alone? All these questions. In the end of the day, we didn't have the intention to try to hurt Richard or to show that it's something that he did. It's more this expression – I don't know if it comes across – or this feeling: Have you ever felt that you've been lied to?

It's like this family discussion that you have in your kitchen. That's the kind of films Rick makes. I also like this idea, like he says, that the best interviews always happen in the kitchen, where we're talking. This is a film that sort of takes place in kitchens and living rooms where we're figuring out what just happened. I think there's a place for that even in documentaries, where a lot of times you go to the cinema to see something that's never before happened or been discovered, or the biggest thing. Maybe this is a small film about a family and something unique that happened, and I'm glad that people still take time to watch these kinds of experiences. These are the kinds of things that we make and that he [**MINNICH**] trusted himself to make, even though it opens a lot of serious questions about ethics and production. Is this a story that deserves such a big screen? In any case, I was glad to be a part of it. And I'm glad that you came to watch it. Thank you very much.

**MINNICH:** Thanks!

*Audience applause.*