

# Stories on screen

By Ann Reily Features Editor | Posted: Thursday, September 18, 2014 3:05 am

As the mother of a 27-year-old man with fragile X syndrome and autism, Newburyport resident Mary Lou Supple has learned to expect the unexpected.

“James has taught us that planning on our part does not involve him,” she said. “We have learned to leave our expectations at the door and to go with whatever’s going on.”

So when her niece Avery Dwyer first approached her with the idea to film a short documentary about James David Supple Colburn, his mother was apprehensive, to say the least.

It was fall 2013, and Dwyer was a senior at Trinity College in Connecticut. The Newburyport High School graduate and the 10 other students in her film production class were challenged to come up with story ideas for a documentary that they would shoot and market in one semester.

The class voted to pursue Dwyer’s proposal to feature her cousin. Supple made sure that Dwyer warned her classmates “that there are many different reactions to expect.” They were still on board.

Fragile X, the most common known cause of autism, is a genetic disorder in which the X chromosome shuts down and stops producing a protein critical for brain development. The syndrome impairs learning, intelligence and behavior.

In Colburn’s case, it means that he has extreme anxiety, is easily overwhelmed and requires supervision in some everyday tasks. But it also means that he has an amazing memory, great comedic timing, a talent for impersonations and a childlike joy for the smallest things in life.

“There isn’t anything he has seen or heard that he doesn’t still remember,” Supple said, recalling a time when she found old pictures of unfamiliar cats that Colburn recognized as belonging to his kindergarten speech teacher. “It goes in, and it’s stored there.”

All of the fears that Supple had about the film were assuaged after a video chat she and her husband, Gus Colburn, had with Dwyer and a few of the other students.



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“Coaching Colburn” is the story of a Newburyport man, James Colburn, with fragile X syndrome and his family. James, right, is pictured with his older brother, Richard.

“James was wandering by, and wandering by again, and eventually, he was the person in the seat by the camera doing ‘Three Stooges’ routines and had the students laughing, and he was clearly enjoying himself,” Supple said. “Then I took a breath and said, ‘OK, he’s bought it, this is going to be good. From that point on, James was a movie star and was happy to define himself as such.’”

The resulting 16-minute film, “Coaching Colburn: Finding Love & Laughter in the Face of Autism,” will be shown during this weekend’s Newburyport Documentary Film Festival. The Supple-Colburn family, including James, older brother Richard and Dwyer, will be on hand for a question-and-answer session with director Jeff Bemiss after the short is shown at the Screening Room on Saturday morning.

The title comes from Colburn’s work as an assistant coach of Newburyport High School’s integrated Special Olympics soccer and basketball teams. A Newburyport High graduate and avid sports fan, he also has jobs in the school cafeteria and at Opportunity Works, a Newburyport nonprofit that provides programs and services for people with developmental disabilities.

“The film is so wonderfully done,” Supple said. “When James was very young, he was trying to understand the world in all kinds of ways, and the movie shows a number of the ways he saw the world, these things he did as a child, his interests and how he demonstrated them in really funny ways that might not have been funny in the moment, but they’re hilarious in retrospect.

“In a very short amount of time, the film captures the strengths he has, the difficulty he has, the way that these things were manifested and the absolute joy he finds in so much of his life,” she said.

“Coaching Colburn” is just one of 19 documentaries — 10 full-length films and nine shorts — featured at this year’s festival.

Another short being shown Saturday, “Stumped,” also tells a story of humor in the face of tragedy.

In September 2011, Will Lautzenheiser had just moved to Montana from Boston for a job teaching film production and screenwriting at the state university. He had only taught two classes when he was admitted to the hospital with a life-threatening bacterial infection that ultimately resulted in the amputation of parts of both arms and legs.

Director Robin Berghaus was originally approached by Charles Merzbacher, director of the film production program at Boston University, to create a story for the alumni magazine and website. She didn’t know Lautzenheiser, but they were both graduate students, two years apart, in the film program at BU.

“Will and I just really connected,” said Berghaus, a Brookline native who now lives in Texas. “I thought there was a lot more to say about Will’s story.”

Berghaus went on to make a 10-minute film about Lautzenheiser that tracks his rehabilitation

along with his first comedy show, a year after his amputations and six months after he moved back to the Boston area.

“I noticed when he was interacting with the medical staff or visitors, he had this really dark sense of humor,” Berghaus said. “I think for Will, it was a way for him to cope with this tremendous loss.”

Berghaus connected Lautzenheiser with a well-known comedian friend and fellow BU graduate, Myq Kaplan, who agreed to help Lautzenheiser prepare for a solo show.

“Will really loves playing with words,” Berghaus said. “I think comedy was kind of a natural transition for him. I think it was a great way to show this other side of his personality.”

The show was successful, and Lautzenheiser now performs regularly as part of a sketch group at ImprovBoston.

Lautzenheiser will answer questions after Saturday afternoon’s screening at the Firehouse Center for the Arts, a session that Berghaus will film for the longer movie she is currently working on. The feature-length documentary will follow Lautzenheiser through an experimental double arm transplant at Brigham and Women’s Hospital and his subsequent recovery. He was approved for the surgery two months ago and is now awaiting a donor.

“We’re really honored to be participating in the festival this year, and we’re spending a lot of time on the feature film and continuing Will’s story,” Berghaus said. “He’s really anxious to move on with his life.”

The 19 films in this year’s festival were selected by a screening committee from hundreds of submissions, according to Joanne Morris, managing director.

In addition to a weekend full of screenings, Q&As, panels and receptions, Morris highlights a couple of special events, including an appearance by Big Bird himself, Carroll Spinney. The Waltham native has been playing the beloved “Sesame Street” character since 1969 and is the subject of “I am Big Bird,” which will close out the festival on Sunday.

Morris is also looking forward to “Turn it Up!” a documentary narrated by Kevin Bacon about the history of the electric guitar. Saturday night’s screening will be followed by a guitar tutorial with musician Chris Stovall Brown; a panel with producer Doug Forbes and former New Hampshire Congressman Paul Hodes, an amateur guitarist featured in the film; and an afterparty at the Grog.

At the end of the festival, awards will given to the best feature, best short, best New England-based film and audience favorite.

If you go

What: Newburyport Documentary Film Festival

When: Tomorrow through Sunday

Where: Firehouse Center for the Arts, Market Square, and Screening Room, 82 State St.

How much: Daytime films are \$10, and evening films are \$15. All-access passes are \$75 and include a private filmmaker reception tomorrow, all evening screenings and a choice of daytime films. A day pass is \$45 and includes the reception and a choice of daytime screenings. All tickets are available at the Firehouse box office, by phone at 978-462-7336 and online at [www.firehouse.org](http://www.firehouse.org).

More information: [www.newburyportfilmfestival.org](http://www.newburyportfilmfestival.org)

## Festival schedule

### Tomorrow

6 p.m.: Private reception for filmmakers and pass holders, Firehouse

7:30 p.m.: “The Ghosts in our Machine” at Firehouse, with afterparty at Oregano Pizzeria and Ristorante

### Saturday

11:30 a.m.: “Our Mockingbird,” Firehouse; Shorts Block 1, “Mike’s Lessons,” “Coaching Colburn” and “Irlanda Elizabeth,” Screening Room

1:30 p.m.: Shorts Block 2, “Stumped,” “Anna” and “Return to Hiroshima,” Firehouse; “The Search for General Tso,” Screening Room

4 p.m.: “Divide in Concord,” Firehouse; free Work-in-Progress Session, Screening Room

7:30 p.m.: “Turn it Up!” at Firehouse, with afterparty at Grog

### Sunday

10:30 a.m.: Free coffee and bagels with filmmakers, Firehouse

11:30 a.m.: Shorts Block 3, “The Stones of the Quarries,” “Olla Rae” and “Can’t Hide Me,” Firehouse; “Coney Island: Dreams for Sale,” Screening Room

1:30 p.m.: “Cyber-Seniors,” Firehouse; free filmmaker panel, Screening Room

3 p.m.: “100 Head/Heart/Feet,” Firehouse; “Do You Believe in Love?” at Screening Room

5:30 p.m.: “I am Big Bird” and Caroll Spinney Q&A, Firehouse