

A FILM ABOUT SURVIVAL



The Kasia Project poster. Photo by Kat Tatlock.
Design by Sabre Imagery.

Kasia, her sister Jackie, and I are on the ferry headed for their Dad's place on Martha's Vineyard – this is an important shoot. We've decided to take the opportunity to get some sweet images of the sisters, hair in the wind, loving smiles. But Jackie's schizophrenia dictates a sour mood. She wants only to recite rote poetry, eyes turning inward, head down. Determined as usual, Kasia tries to cajole her, but it's not working, and her attempt to compensate results in posing. My worst nightmare. I finally bag the camera.

And so it goes. The challenges of capturing the inner drama of an amazing individual – a practiced physician, accomplished violinist, extreme athlete, budding filmmaker, good friend, ovarian cancer survivor, and...my client.

When I joined The Kasia Project in 2004, a great deal of footage had already been shot – by Kasia, her artist/mother Liz and her artsy filmmaker friends, and a team of professionals under the direction of Richard Gönci. He had brought me in when he took a full time job and the project needed someone to “move it forward” – write grant proposals, help produce, and handle the client.

Kasia was in remission at the time, still living in the Hudson River Valley with her long-time partner, and practicing family medicine. Partnered financially with Richard, but neither the owner of the film copyright nor a film professional, she was becoming frustrated and feeling powerless as the film started to drag. And although her health was stable, the “sword of Damocles,” as she called the threat of death, was always looming.

The more familiar I became with the project, the more it grew on me. The dual point of view of a doctor-turned-patient was unique and privileged, our subject was attractive, articulate, complex, and outrageously talented, and the footage was fantastic – “an embarrassment of riches,” Richard called it. I agreed. With Loren Miller's editing skills, they had already won a Telly Award for their trailer and there was interest from a couple of venues. It would be a superb feature documentary.

I wrote a paper edit and produced additional shoots, stepping in to direct when Richard was too busy, which was more and more the case. Kasia was increasingly anxious and frustrated, and worried she might not be around to see the film finished. She was also leaving her stable relationship and beautiful home, moving into a student apartment in Waltham, looking for a new medical practice, and experiencing disturbing physical symptoms.

In 2006, as Kasia learned of her first recurrence, Richard bowed out and reluctantly transferred the film copyright to Kasia. It was a very hard time for all of us, but especially for Kasia. Nevertheless, she was determined to see the project – her baby – come to life, and she looked to me to make it happen.

I had been screening boxes of old tapes that had been shelved, and was discovering many gems. What I needed was the right editor, and I knew who it should be. When my old friend and colleague, Julia Dixon Eddy, agreed to take on the edit and help produce and write as well, I was elated. I also knew the right person to score the film – the gifted musician and composer Cyrus Sink, whose musical palette mirrored Kasia's complexity and depth. Our new team was harmonious, excited and ready.

In the months that followed, Julia and I re-screened all of the footage, old and new, reorganized and catalogued it. And with fresh eyes we began to focus our purpose, our audience, find the shape of our story, and identify holes to fill and plan our shoots. Kasia was thrilled with our sensitivity and approach. A new vision was forming.

And the footage kept coming – from a truly rare and revelatory interview with Kasia's psychiatrist, and comprehensive sessions with the Director of Medical Gynecologic Oncology at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, explaining Kasia's cancer history using CT scans and ultrasounds, to frivolous b-roll of Jackie lifting weights and dancing to James Brown, and Kasia and a friend playing the violin and cello in boas, hats, and underwear. But in the fall of 2008, as the footage rolled in, the economy tanked and the money rolled out.

We adjusted our budget. We met, we argued, we adapted, we argued, we settled, and all the while, Julia and I cut and wrote, cut and wrote. Outline 1, 2, 5, 7. Kasia moaned. When would we make up our damn minds? But she put on her wet suit and swam across Walden Pond in the October chill. She doctored in the Boston area, played the violin with her new pianist beau, played tennis with Jackie, and nursed her aging cat. And while Jules and I were re-making our film, Kasia was re-making herself.

I was also hot on the trail of a fiscal sponsor. After a positive courtship with an ovarian cancer organization, Ovations for the Cure, circumstances arose that prevented them from taking on our project, but we had the good fortune to be invited to join Filmmakers Collaborative and share their many benefits.

Another great connection came through Ovations, who referred us to their marketing and design team at Sabre Imagery. Creating a website and marketing postcard with them has been a fully delightful collaboration. We are also looking forward to working with Dave Allen, a local legend as colorist and online whiz, whose excellent finishing skills have enhanced many of the finest films made in the region.

So we're off to the races – in mid/fine cut, dropping in exciting music and about to score for real, preparing for Kasia's final interview and narration, launching our beautiful website, www.thekasiaproject.com and series fundraising and marketing campaign, paving the way for distribution, and doing a lot of praying.

The ferry footage from the trip to Martha's Vineyard? It'll be in there; it totally makes sense in the context of Kasia's story -- after all, this is non-fiction and life is complex. We're confident that the way in which we'll deliver our information and artistry will move and enlighten our audiences, both the medical community and the general public. And we know we have a product that will give new meaning to the term, “survivor!”

Producer/director/writer of *The Kasia Project*, and one of the region's leading filmmakers, Kat Tatlock has created dozens of award-winning dramatic and documentary films, educational videos, and radio programs.