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Prevailing Optimism Amidst Personal Affliction

By LAURA KERN

In 1999 12-year-old Cody Unser was stricken suddenly with transverse myelitis, an uncommon neurological disorder that targets the spinal cord.

For Cody, it brought on paralysis from the chest down and the possibility that she might never walk again.

Informational and emotionally direct, Chris Schueler's "Cody: The First Step" is a succinct 66-minute portrait of life in a wheelchair whose steadfast subject (the daughter and granddaughter of the racing legends Al Unser Jr. and Sr.) has made it her mission to raise awareness - and research dollars - in the name of finding a cure for all spinal-cord-related paralysis. Notably, she also organizes scuba-diving excursions for wheelchair users and lobbies for stem-cell research.

Her prevailing optimism is at times countered by introspective moments in which she discusses her troubles and doubts, and, even more candidly, her sexuality, shattering notions that those with paralysis are not sexual beings. The film, with narration by Glenn Close and a recurring song that tugs at the heartstrings a little too hard, also shows Ms. Unser, now 22, facing everyday challenges; a segment in which she struggles to maneuver herself out of the bathtub is particularly effective (if a bit voyeuristic).

Personal-affliction documentaries are a dime a dozen; seldom are they this gripping and inspiring.

CODY: THE FIRST STEP

Opens on Friday in Manhattan.

Produced and directed by Chris Schueler; narrated by Glenn Close; photographers, Randy McComas, Bob Willis, Dean Butler, Mr. Schueler, Patrick O'Donnell and Ed Smith; music by Jeff Jolly; released by Christopher Productions. At the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 1 hour 6 minutes. This film is not rated.

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