



- [About Slackerwood](#)
- [Contributors](#)
- [Venue guide](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Archive by category](#)
- [Archive by month](#)
- [Contact](#)

#### Search

Thanks to the *Austin Chronicle* for selecting us [Best Austin Movie Blog](#) of 2011.



[Home](#) » [Blogs](#) » [Jordan Gass-Poore's blog](#)

### 'My Sister Sarah' Explores The Personal Perspective of Addiction

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on August 21, 2012 - 1:30pm in [Local Indies](#) | [Production News](#)



Austin-based filmmaker [Elizabeth Chatelain](#) remembered the event that made her realize how detached she and her elder sister had become. Her documentary and University of Texas radio-TV-film graduate thesis, *My Sister, Sarah*, explores their relationship and her sister's battle with drug addiction.

Chatelain had returned home to Fargo in 2007 after graduating from Middlebury College in Vermont. The 22-year-old's homecoming was cut short when she, her mother and brother stopped by her estranged sister's apartment to persuade her to go to the hospital. When her sister Sarah Chatelain-Gress finally opened the door for her brother, after refusing her mother, her physical appearance was astounding. After combating drug addiction for years, Chatelain-Gress had relapsed.

"I saw her and it was like seeing this other person," Chatelain said. "It's not the person you have grown up with; it's not the person that you just had a conversation with on the phone. She was like a shell of a person. She was just out of her mind."

Chatelain-Gress had consumed an extreme amount of cocaine and numerous other drugs. Chatelain said it was difficult to feel familial compassion toward Chatelain-Gress because of their years-long tumultuous relationship.

"Here's this person in this awful, awful state; probably the worst state of their lives, and I'm supposed to feel so much compassion," she said. "I feel some, but it's as much as I feel for someone that I may not know that well. It's very sad to me. Addiction pushes people apart and pushes families apart."

Chatelain-Gress was 15 years old when she started using alcohol and drugs, running away from home and fighting and skipping school, Chatelain said. For 13 years, she would be in and out of drug rehabilitation centers across the nation.

When she returned to Fargo from a rehabilitation center, the 18-year-old Chatelain-Gress had not used drugs for five years. However, after she graduated from high school, she became addicted to methamphetamines, the new drug to sweep North Dakota at the time.

Then Chatelain-Gress began to deal drugs.

Then the police raided her apartment.

Chatelain said the interviews with her sister and parents for *My Sister, Sarah* made her realize there were problems within their home that were beyond her sister's control and negatively affected her.

"The documentary has forced me to really understand the truth," she said. "The footage makes me cry, I can't watch a lot of it without getting emotional -- it's different than when I saw her relapse. It's brought me closer to her."

Chatelain said her parents, however, have differing feelings about *My Sister, Sarah*. She said her mother has been very open and willing to discuss the past with her, while her father, even though he is supportive of her and her work, has been more hesitant and reserved.

#### Recent posts

- [Welcome to \[Archived\] Slackerwood](#)
- [Lone Star Cinema: Kid Blue](#)
- [Au Revoir, and Don't Forget to Feed the Parrot](#)
- [Movies This Year: Our Reviews of Upcoming Releases](#)
- [Slackerwood: Where We're All Going \(We Hope\)](#)
- [Debbie's Fantastic and Favorite Film Memories](#)
- [Film on Tap: Pass the Bubbly](#)
- [Review: The Connection](#)

#### Recent reviews

- [Lone Star Cinema: Kid Blue](#)
- [Movies This Year: Our Reviews of Upcoming Releases](#)
- [Review: The Connection](#)
- [Review: In the Name of My Daughter](#)
- [Review: Poltergeist](#)
- [Review: Tomorrowland](#)

[more](#)

Addiction is a problem Chatelain, her brother and sister have been confronted with for the majority of their lives. Even though Chatelain-Gress, 30, has not used drugs for four years, her struggle continues. Last year, only weeks after the birth of their daughter Serenity, Chatelain-Gress's husband of less than one year died in a car crash.

Chatelain said she discussed the idea for her documentary after her sister's husband's death. She said her sister has been very vocal about her experiences with the help of a national 12-step recovery program.

"One of the most interesting things I've found from doing this project is that almost everybody I've talked to can somehow relate to addiction," Chatelain said. "I think we all have addictions, it's just some people have addictions that are more destructive and affect people more."

The documentary's story attracted Kristen Washington, AFF Summer Film Camp volunteer coordinator, who helped Chatelain promote *My Sister, Sarah*. Washington said she met Chatelain this summer during the filmmaker's time as an AFF Summer Film Camp instructor. The award-winning producer and director has worked for the likes of local filmmakers [Kat Candler](#) and [PJ Raval](#).

Candler said Chatelain, who was a Summer and Fall 2011 Candler Productions intern, is fierce and someone to keep an eye on.

"She's a really great human being and I think that is reflected in her work," she said.

*My Sister, Sarah* raised almost \$4,000 through the crowdfunding site Indiegogo, which will go toward post-production work. Chatelain said the film is scheduled for completion by December (as is her graduation from UT), with hopes of entering it in various documentary festivals.

[Photo credit: Elizabeth Chatelain]