

**PIXELA
FILMS**

DISARMING LOVE

A feature length documentary about
love, healing, resilience
and video gaming.





STORY SUMMARY: Eleven months into her deployment to Iraq, Mary Dague found an explosive device (IED) outside an elementary school. While trying to deactivate the device it exploded, taking off both of her arms above the elbows. Mary had always been an avid gamer, but after her time in Iraq the hobby has taken on even more importance as she navigates her new disabilities. Her husband, James Cribbet, is currently active duty in the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), the same division where Mary served. When they first met, James was going through an extremely difficult time after losing his best friend while serving together. Mary had been medically retired for several years and had been helping others cope with invisible wounds. Seeing James suffering alone in the barracks, she invited him to her house to play video games. This eventually turned into a relationship where caregiving duties combined with their shared love of video games has also provided both with a therapeutic outlet. James is often cooking meals, brushing hair, doing laundry and prepping things Mary needs, while reciprocally Mary supports James with his PTSD diagnosis and helps him navigate trauma and depression.

The film examines the world of online gaming as an outlet for community connection. After returning from deployment, many struggle not only with re-entry to civilian life, but also with the loss of a close-knit community. Through Twitch and other online platforms, Mary and her husband James seek to recreate this sense of support and company to their followers. Their work within the veteran community takes on more urgency in saving lives - on average 22 veterans commit suicide every day. Gaming has been a coping strategy for Mary during many traumatic events in her life, including childhood sexual abuse, an abusive first marriage, and her battle with cancer; she credits the gaming community with helping her stay resilient, positive, and humorous.

Mary and James travel to ComicCon and gaming events, peeling back the veneer of the virtual world inhabited by their gaming community to deepen their personal connections. This duality of visible and virtual parallels their own physicality. Similar to the veteran community, the gaming world is also misunderstood and misrepresented. Through these trips we get to meet a range of folks that will surprise and entertain the audience in ways they might not think possible. In an exciting twist, Mary and James are also collaboratively directing the creation of a new video game with the University of Connecticut, one of the leading video game design programs in the US. The game features characters based on an unpublished fantasy book that Mary has been writing for a decade and will be designed natively to be played with feet, the same way that Mary plays. For folks with hands there will be ways to adapt the controllers. In designing a game from the inception and ideation phase specifically for feet they hope to create new ways people think about gaming.

During the film, James is deployed once more, leaving Mary at home. He is both rejoining the same community that Mary used to be a part of, and also returning to the grave danger of active duty. As the film progresses, we see the impact of Mary and James' work within the veteran community, including the importance of their efforts in preventing veteran suicide. We also examine what it's like for them to do this outreach while managing their own personal mental and physical health. The film concludes by highlighting the importance of community and connection in healing and recovery, and the power of virtual communities and fantasy for processing trauma.



Access and Subject-Director Relationship: Director Tim O'Donnell has worked with the veteran community for over a decade. He has directed two feature length documentary films in [NOT A WAR STORY](#) and [TOUGHER THAN A TANK](#), both featuring a range of veterans. Through these two features and hundreds of other social short films Tim has created a great relationship with the veteran community, several veteran organizations and influencers. Similar to those films we'll be hosting several test screenings to help craft the story accurately and ethically. He builds real, relational connections with subjects as he brings their experiences from the margin to the center. Tim met Mary during production of [NOT A WAR STORY](#) in 2014 and they became quick friends. Vice and a few other major outlets have run stories about Mary, and all of them have been extremely problematic depictions for her and the veteran community. Mary and James only trust Tim with telling their story. They have refused several other media requests.

Project Stage and Timeline: We've been in production with Mary and James for a little over three years. We have raised/in-kind donations of \$200K and are now seeking \$280K to help finish the film. We've captured a range of powerful personal moments, live and virtual gaming and veterans events, master interviews with key subjects, and the ongoing state of James' military service. With key moments coming up in Mary and James' lives, we anticipate production will go until March of 2024. We will be capturing Mary's efforts to finish both a fantasy novel and autobiographical book by the end of the year, James' upcoming retirement and transition into civilian life, a trip to Comic Con, a twitch virtual gaming event, the new game being developed at UConn, and Mary and James' continued struggle and management of their own mental health needs. We will be working on post-production throughout production and anticipate a rough cut by October of 2024 with an early 2025 release of the full film. Some of our key partners are listed below.





Artistic Approach: Our artistic rendering of Mary's story, and how her own trauma enables her to help others, reaches deeply into the veteran community, but also reaches far beyond it. Mary's story, in game play and in life, is about creating new narratives. It is, fundamentally, about meaning-making, even in the most dire and difficult circumstances. Mary is rewriting her own story, enacting new possibilities, and bringing others into a new, more hopeful, adaptive, and positive narrative.

In this story of resilience forged by trauma, our film's artistic approach is informed by our central character's personality and passions: we blend observational, archival, and interview footage with an immersion into the virtual landscape of online gaming, including video game sequences and excerpts from Mary's own audio tapes and video creations combined with many moments of humor, a personality trait that is so ingrained in Mary's approach to life. To accomplish this, we plan to use a blend of traditional and experimental techniques, including an innovative blend of gaming and fantasy aesthetic with real-life vérité, and the use of projection and projection mapping to create a unique visual language that represents the trauma and resilience of the subjects in an intimate and emotionally resonant way. The film will also utilize various stages of the new video game Mary and James are developing: sometimes we see vérité moments of the collaboration and other times we see animated excerpts from the game itself. We'll watch as the game develops from ideation to birth, both the highs and lows of the process, and the eventual release of the game with gamers playing it for the first time.

Observational footage will capture the physical and emotional challenges Mary faces as a double amputee in everyday life, and her interactions with her husband. Interviews will offer a deeper exploration of Mary's background, her experiences as a veteran, and her motivations for turning to connected but virtual communities as a means of surviving.

Through observation, the many facets of Mary's personality unfold: she is an introvert and a community leader; she is strong and vulnerable. She is a survivor of abuse and trauma, yet she rejects victimhood or sentimentality. Instead, she embraces authenticity, whether the dark humor of online gaming, her whimsical cosplay wedding, or her quiet, steady leadership in the Veteran community. The immediacy and intimacy of our cinematic approach aligns with Mary's experience and perspective: after the war, her most heroic actions are her matter-of-fact, resilient, outward-facing manner. She isn't trying to be anyone's hero, whether jumping on a bomb, triumphing in a video game, or supporting her fellow veterans, yet she is. Accordingly, the footage of Mary using her feet to play a video game or put on make-up doesn't have a prurient gaze; rather, it is a direct and unapologetic approach, like her online name, "Wonder Nubs." The film, like our subject, isn't trying to lecture; instead, it offers a unique, funny, and inspirational story of resilience.

KEY TEAM MEMBERS



Vincent "Rocco" Vargas (Producer) brings a wealth of experience and guidance to the project. Vincent is a Mexican-American veteran and Hollywood actor currently on FX's TV show [MAYANS MC](#). Over the decade Mary and James have become incredibly close with Vargas bonding over their individual PTSD journey and continuing to positively impact other veterans and civilians. This is a very unique access point with Vargas as Producer guiding the veteran story and subject matter.



Marga Varea (Impact Producer) is a distribution strategist and impact producer passionate about merging traditional and non-traditional strategies to build successful and transparent distribution pathways for independent documentary films. With over twenty years of experience in film and television, Marga has worked with dozens of filmmakers, and award-winning films. She is the founder and director of Twin Seas Media, and leads impact and engagement for the newly founded DC/DOX.



Michael Schlitz (Advisor) is a double arm amputee veteran with 85% of his body burned and is helping craft the story from the perspective of someone who has lost limbs and navigating a world that doesn't necessarily support them. He is an ambassador for the Gary Sinise Foundation, Gallant Few and supports veterans navigating invisible wounds. He has spoken at countless events.



Tim O'Donnell (Director) is an Emmy-nominated and award winning documentary filmmaker. His 7 features have appeared on ESPN, NBC, PBS, Hulu, CNN Films and film festivals around the world. His film [NOT A WAR STORY](#) opened at #1 for all iTunes Documentaries and premiered at the Academy of Motion Pictures. His follow up feature [LIFE WITHOUT BASKETBALL](#) opened at DOC NYC and premiered on SundanceNow. HBO's Mary Carillo said of Tim's work, "The story is so beautiful, so lovingly told and so incredibly moving."

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