

Ron Williams, director. *Happy Valley*.

Orem, Utah: Forever Green Pictures, 2007

Reviewed by James Willmore and Jenny Willmore

Producer and director Ron Williams began his film as an attempt to follow his ex-wife, Nancy, as she entered drug rehab. While filming, Nancy's daughter, MaCall Peterson, was involved in the accidental overdose and death of her friend Amelia Sorich and the subsequent attempt to hide the body. From this development, the filmmaker realized the scope of the movie had changed considerably. He began to wonder if there was a relationship between Utah County residents' reputation for overly blissful happiness and the struggles that addicts in Utah face. Thus was born the documentary *Happy Valley*, a title meant as a play on the nickname for Utah Valley. Although much of the movie does not take place in Utah Valley, the title and publicity poster conjure up caricatures of the stereotypical Utah County resident—determinedly and obliviously happy.

This is not a drug addiction story like those we see in VH1's *Behind the Music*, where overindulged rock stars are torn apart by excessive partying. The strength of *Happy Valley* is in hearing a beautiful young girl with a Utah accent say, "All I remember is teaching her how to shoot up." These stories are compelling because the people in them are so familiar. We see those who are suffering from the consequences of drug abuse as brothers and sisters and not as statistics with accompanying mug shots or obituary photos.

Of the two of us reviewing the film, this reality came as no surprise to James, who has worked as a pharmacist for twelve years. He has seen many respectable men and women humbled by addiction to legal and illegal drugs. He and others in the medical field recognize the common faces of drug addiction: the friend next door, a member of the ward, a grandfather with silver hair and a winning smile, the popular athlete in high school.

Such individuals in *Happy Valley* let us into their lives and provide likeable smiles for us to put onto the face of drug abuse in Utah.

The movie begins with Danny Allen—a Utah TV personality with a fifteen-year drug problem. Danny expresses his deep love for the LDS Church and his determination to face his addiction, all while on his way to buy drugs from his dealer. At the end of the film, he is seen throwing up next to his truck on the first morning of rehab. The charming and funny Danny, at this point shaking and visibly ill, pleads, “If you can *just not start*.”

The death of Amelia Sorich is told by her parents and also by her friends MaCall Peterson and Jasen Calacino, who are both serving time in prison for their involvement. We learn that MaCall introduced drugs to Amelia after learning how to shoot up from her mom, Nancy. She felt it was the only way to bond with a mother who was around so seldom that her older sister often missed elementary school to take care of her. We listen to Amelia’s parents tell about the pain of having to identify their daughter’s body from a horrible photograph, even though the picture had been retouched in an attempt to not frighten them.

We also meet the family of Colton Berger, a popular student whose entire high school attended his funeral after his drug-related death. As his father says, “Everyone who uses drugs isn’t just hanging out in a dark corner with just a few people. It could be anybody.” Other compelling stories include that of Blake Ballingham, who overdosed and almost died while his older brother was serving as a missionary for the Church.

The movie suggests we have work to do in educating each other about drug abuse. When the Soriches are asked if Amelia had ever done drugs before the night she overdosed, they reply, “Hard drugs? No. She just did marijuana and ecstasy.” Detective Lambert tells of being undercover at a prescription drug party where he knew that a significant number of LDS kids there would be blessing the sacrament and attending church the next day. When the young people were asked why that did not bother them, their response was, “It’s not against the Word of Wisdom—it’s just a pill and some water.”

But, as documentary producer Sheila Curran Bernard says, making a documentary is not just about good storytelling but about good journalism as well.¹ This is where *Happy Valley* falters. The statistics on prescription drug use, suicides, and Jell-O consumption, instead of adding to the narrative, seriously detract. Some of the statistics, like the one stating that “40 percent of Utahns have used prescription drugs for nonmedical use in their lifetime,” do not match with James’s medical experience, and there is no way to check the numbers or look into the studies, because there is no reference—just a line that says *The Daily Herald*. The film does not even

attempt to tie in a statistic about antidepressant use when claiming that “Utah prescribes nearly twice as many antidepressants [as] the national average.” Once again, there is no way to check it, because the line merely reads *L.A. Times*.

Most information presented is on the high rate of prescription drug abuse in Utah, but of the eight addicts whose stories were told in this film, only three used prescription drugs. Did the others start there? The film does not say, and so we were left confused. Another problem is that the film seems to swing back and forth between insisting that the drug abuse we see is typical, and that the drug abuse we see is unique to Utah. We do not necessarily have a problem with either point of view, but the film would have been more powerful if the filmmakers had picked one or the other.

We were also very distracted by the segment on addiction to sugar, and the statement that sugar is the ultimate gateway drug. This claim makes more sense when you know that Williams owns a company that sells natural “farmaceuticals,”² but the subject of sugar addiction really should have been made into its own movie if he wanted to make that point. Instead, the placement of such a segment in a movie about drugs suggests that sugar is just as dangerous as heroin and OxyContin abuse, but without statistical or even anecdotal evidence. Here *Happy Valley* begins to cross the line into what Daniel B. Wood of the *Christian Science Monitor* calls “docu-ganda.”³

Perhaps what we need most, however, is not so much stellar documentation as a catalyst for debate and even a call to repentance. The film can be useful in opening the eyes of many in a community that may believe LDS values make us drug-abuse-proof. After getting to know and love the individuals and families in this movie, we cannot deny the potential for our loved ones becoming involved in drug abuse. James, knowing what he does about the way drugs work with the chemistry of the brain and body, understands that drugs are no respecter of persons, and he is glad that this film points out that anyone is susceptible.

The film asks us to evaluate whether or not we truly understand and believe in the power of change and redemption. This question reminds us of something Sheri Dew wrote: “I fear that some of us understand just enough about the gospel to feel guilty . . . but not enough about the Atonement to feel the peace and strength, the power and mercy, it affords us.”⁴ Perhaps we know enough about our faith to feel guilty about drug abuse problems, but we need to work on our belief that guilt and other spiritual consequences of drug abuse can be faced and overcome through the power of the Atonement. Hugh Nibley said that “the Book of Mormon tells us that the essence of repentance is knowing exactly what we are.”⁵

The participants in this film show that we are a people capable of drug abuse. We are a people capable of being judgmental, hurt, and angry. We are also capable of unbelievable patience and forgiveness. We are a community capable of addressing our drug abuse problem.

In the final minutes of the film, a lonely teenage girl serving a prison sentence holds up a handwritten sign: "I am still somebody." And a grieving mother is a witness for forgiveness and redemption by letting that girl know that she agrees. Some of us *do* live in *Happy Valley*—a valley that is not only joyful, but one that is also wise.

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1. Sheila Curran Bernard, "Documentary Storytelling: The Drama of Real Life," available online at http://www.writersstore.com/article.php?articles_id=431, excerpt taken from Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling for Video and Filmmakers* (Burlington, Mass.: Focal Press, 2004).
2. <http://forevergreen.org>.
3. Daniel B. Wood, "In 'Docu-ganda' Films, Balance Is Not the Objective," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 2, 2006, available online at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0602/p01s02-ussc.html>.
4. Sheri Dew, *No Doubt about It* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 85.
5. Gary P. Gillum, ed., *Of All Things: Classic Quotations from Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 67.