

Michael Foley

In the opening scenes of *The Deepest Breath*, Laura McGann takes her audience down where they need to go. Deep, deep down. Alessia Zecchini, an Italian free diver, is balletically guiding herself over a hundred metres down a vertical rope into the sea, seeking a world record, supported by a single breath. Her heartbeat slows gradually to a sparse throb, descending through shades of blue Bahamian water from cyan to pitch dark, past the point where the pressure pushes Zecchini into controlled freefall.

When she returns to the surface, the effort has brought her to the brink of blackout. The safety divers who oversee her dive take her in their arms. Her eyes are rolling into the back of her head. One diver begins to perform mouth-to-mouth as the screen turns to black.

In that moment McGann fuses everything graceful and awe-inspiring about the sport of free diving with its proximity to catastrophe. In her film, free diving itself is merely the vertical rope guiding the story of the relationship between Zecchini and Stephen Keenan from Glasnevin, whose search for purpose and fulfilment brought him to free diving as a safety diver.

The film culminates in their tragic parting as Zecchini attempts to dive the Blue Hole at Dahab in Egypt – an 80-metre dive through a coral arch that had claimed over 130 lives – Keenan's final act in life saving her from death. When she filmed there McGann snorkelled carefully out for ten metres along the thin coral ridge, beguiled by the fish swimming within arm's reach. Then the coral disappeared.

"All of a sudden it just drops to nothing, like the Cliffs of Moher. Straight down. That was a really beautiful moment. I got to see what [divers] were talking about when they were saying the blue just calls you down. It's inviting and calming. I just saw blue, indefinitely. It was like looking into the sky."

Everything began with a chat six years ago with Jamie D'Alton of Motive TV in Dublin, wondering if McGann was the only person hooked by this story she read in the paper. Since then they have worked with some of the foremost documentary producers on the planet, gotten dizzied by excitement, pressure, critical acclaim and altitude sickness at the Sundance Festival and witnessed *The Deepest Breath* become Netflix's breakout documentary of the summer, gathering over eight million views, making Netflix's top ten list in 39 countries.

"At the start of putting something together, you don't know," she says. "It seemed to have all the elements that spoke to me as to what would make a good documentary. I just didn't know if the archive existed or if people would want to make this film and take part."

What she discovered was often overwhelming. Once the community opened itself to her, the search for footage sent free divers into the back of their wardrobes rooting out old tapes that blended into a seamless reel depicting the stories McGann wanted to tell. "Sometimes when we'd get that missing bit of archive and we'd put it in, I'd just sit there and cry. I'd just be there like I cannot believe I'm looking [at this]."

The key that locked the entire story



The world's leading free divers regularly risk death to attempt the feats that make them feel alive

A dive into the unknown

Laura McGann's Netflix documentary *The Deepest Breath* shines poignant light on awe-inspiring world of free divers

together emerged one day in Dún Laoighaire. Having contacted Keenan's father, Peter, he suggested they meet at a bar near his home. It turned out McGann was living in the apartment overhead. While there, Keenan produced a pen drive containing 12 hours of audio interviews with his son. The family also handed her 24 DV tapes charting Keenan's travels.

"They had never been rewind. There's so much stuff in the film no one had ever seen before, only Stephen himself as he was recording it. They kind of saw Stephen come to life again."

A few days after showing the final film to the Keenans, McGann was in Zecchini's living room in Rome, perched on a kitchen chair as Zecchini, her father, Enzo, and Mauro her boyfriend watched. At the end, Zecchini turned to McGann.

"She took a moment, then said

thank you and gave me a big hug. I just burst out crying."

Later that night Zecchini rang McGann looking for a copy of the film. Why? Because, she said, it would save her having to explain what she had gone through.

"For me, who was trying to get this right all along, I was like 'thank God this can be useful to her in some shape or form'. She had given so much to this film and it's taken a lot out of her. I'm just really glad it can be in some way useful to her in dealing with it all."

Finding a connection with this outlier world wasn't difficult.

The sea was

always McGann's happy place. Her father was a member of the army special forces unit, sneaking her into the assault courses in the Curragh Woods. "It was like *Ireland's Fittest Family*, he'd have me going up and down things. That was always good crack."

She performed with a local drama group in Newbridge and wrote her own plays. Sometimes the actors outnumbered the audience, but McGann kept seeking her path, like Zecchini as a child protecting her dream to dive deeper than anyone else.

She studied film in Ballyfermot and completed her studies in Liverpool, opening herself up to a different type of film making. "I realised there was stories

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Sometimes when we'd get that missing bit of archive and put it in, I'd sit there and cry

out there far more interesting than stories I was going to make up in my head."

She was drawn to different worlds and subcultures. *The End of the Counter* was inspired by her grandfather's collection of Super 8 reels recording his development of the first supermarkets in Ireland. She followed nuclear weapons protesters to Glasgow and entered the world of Irish roller derby to make *Revolutions*.

"Stuff where I could totally immerse myself in this world. They're the kind of documentaries I enjoy, where there's a world and you get to be in it and go how is this working?"

What she found in the free diving community rang a distant bell with her own work: committing heart and soul to stories like free divers to their calling. "A lot of free divers would be people who don't follow the crowd. It's a different path in life. It's a path that takes a lot of sacrifice. You have to travel to beautiful places but places you might have to spend half a year and that can be tricky. It's not terribly well paid, it's not something people do for the money, certainly. It's a passion, a vocation."

"The safety divers, even if you don't know the safety diver you're putting your life in their hands. If something happens to me down there, you're going to bring me back up to air, to my family, to the beach, to my life. It's like the ultimate trust game. That brings this really lovely bond between lots of people. I just saw them as being incredibly brave. They were doing something I'd love to be able to do but maybe haven't been in a position to do. And I'm totally living vicariously through all of them."

Some outcomes since the film's release have also been poignant and fulfilling. This summer Zecchini's father, Enzo, met Peter Keenan in Rome for the first time. Encountering Zecchini's fierce self-belief and conviction was inspiring to her. "She knows what will happen usually when she tries something. For me I've learned to listen to my own gut and how I feel about things."

And the pure, uncomplicated kindness of people. About a year into the struggle to get legs underneath her idea, Peter Keenan saw the stress weighing heavy on McGann.

"He said 'don't feel like this is my dying wish to have this film made. If you don't manage to make it, it's not the end of the world'. I was 'here's you trying to put me at ease in this, thinking of how I feel'. He's a very caring person. I think he thought this was just a way of helping a person do the thing they want to do."

Like father, like son.

● *The Deepest Breath* is available on Netflix