

LIFE



Getting to the root cause of anorexia

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HOW DO you grieve, when death goes viral? That is the question at the heart of South African film-maker, Tarryn Lee Crossman's feature film, *Timelines*.

Crossman is an AFDA graduate, who, after travelling the continent with MTV, decided to study specialised documentary-making in New York.

She won best documentary at the California International Shorts Festival for *Hyena Boys* and is also the maker of the controversial *Fatherland*. Her films have been screened at festivals across the world, most recently at the Flickerfest in Sydney, the Portland International Film Festival and the Love Your Shorts Film Festival in Florida.

The 36-year-old lives in Joburg, where she runs her own company, TIA Productions. *Timelines*, which will be screened at the Durban Film Festival this month and at the Indie Karoo Film Festival next month, tells the story of three girls, across three continents, who, like so many youngsters today, lived their lives on social media. She explores how each untimely death played out online and in the real world.

Most South Africans will recognise effervescent Jenna Lowe, who at 17 was diagnosed with rare pulmonary arterial hypertension.

Jenna needed a bilateral lung transplant, which made her aware of how few registered donors there were in South Africa. She and her family used social, print and digital media to rally for awareness. Her organ donation campaign, billed "Get Me to 21", went viral in the first 24 hours.

But behind the blogs she was losing her battle with the disease. Her family, now mourning her loss, must try to integrate it into their lives while keeping her legacy alive.

Kaileigh Fryer of Australia was killed in a car accident when she was 19.

At her funeral, her family shared her diarised bucket list of 49 things she wanted to do before she died.

Soon after, the list went viral, and strangers from around the world began ticking dreams off Kaileigh's list.

The items included starting a charity and writing a song and they morphed into a kind of digital shrine, keeping a version of Kaileigh alive in the virtual world.

Fifteen-year-old Amber Cornwell, meanwhile, was bullied for years.

After writing her final post – "If I died tonight would anyone cry?" – the American teenager took her own life.

Her family were unaware of her online plea. The ultimate question remains: "Why didn't she look for help in the real world?"

Crossman tells the girls' stories through intimate interviews with their families and friends, home video footage and a look at their social media profiles.

Her goal as a film-maker, she said, "was to tell honest stories about the world that potentially change the way we see each other and the space around us".

She said these stories were difficult to tell because of their personal nature.

"On the one hand you have to take ownership of someone else's narrative, and on the other, there are real people.

"I leave and will move on to the next project, but they have to live with what the film does to them forever. It seems obvious, but I think as documentary film-makers we have to constantly check in and ask the hard questions of ourselves. Our intentions have to be pure."

Crossman explains: "Every week there is a new internet sensation, and all we ever really get to know about the person is from the news, and at most what can be told in a two-minute viral video.

"With this film I tried to get beyond the profile pictures and headlines to meet the real Jenna Lowe, Kaileigh Fryer and Amber Cornwell.

"This is inevitably a story about grieving – the private grief of losing a child, a sister or first love. We explore how this process is affected by the fact that these girls' lives had gone viral and so extremely public."

Crossman manages to show up the best and the worst of social media.

She said: "Jenna was so incredibly brave. She chose to fight for all those in need of an organ. She was still just a teenage girl, who was scared and angry at times and needed her mom, but through the internet she managed to create real change. Every young girl can be a Jenna.

"It is the same with Kaileigh. She was just an ordinary ambitious 19-year-old, who loved her friends and partying. But she wanted to see the world, so she wrote a bucket list, and because she passed away so tragically, that bucket list went viral.

"At home her family and friends are devastated. I do not know if her mom will ever be the same again, and so in the film we ask: Is this digital shrine that has been created in her name good for mom, or is it holding her back from moving on?"

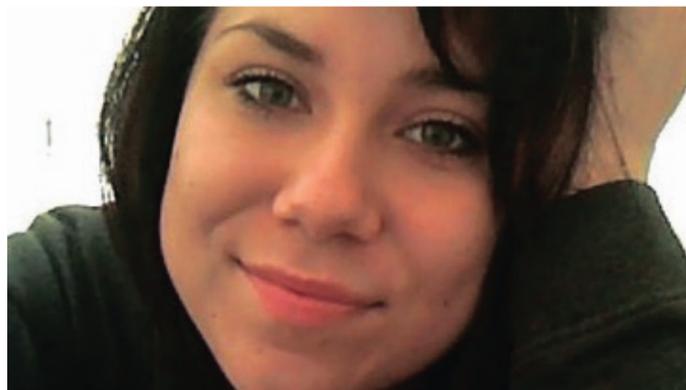
"Amber's story is completely different. She publicly broadcast her suicide by asking 'Will anyone cry if I die tonight?'"



SEEKING ANSWERS: Film-maker Tarryn Lee Crossman explores how an untimely death plays out online and when grief goes viral.

Confronting life and death on the internet

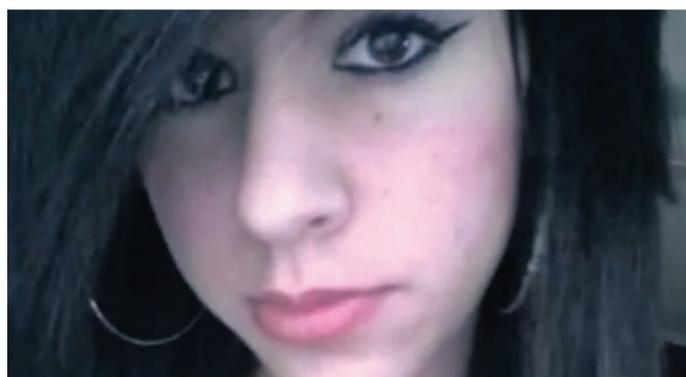
Film-maker Tarryn Lee Crossman takes an introspective look at cyber-bullying, digital shrines and social media movements through the lives of three girls whose deaths went viral, writes **Omeshnie Naidoo**



FREE SPIRIT: Kaileigh Fryer died in a car crash.



CHAMPION: Campaigner Jenna Lowe lost her battle with a rare lung disease.



CONSEQUENCES: Amber Cornwell killed herself.

Parents are from a different generation, but they need to realise their kids are living a whole other life online, on the internet

before she hanged herself. So instead of celebrating her life online, her mom wants nothing to do with social media.

"It is a more complicated story about cyber-bullying and blame, but above all it is about grief."

Crossman has a pure vérité style. Always aiming for a visual story where you show rather than tell, as much as possible.

"Jenna did so much good and changed so many lives, never feeling sorry for herself or giving up.

"And Kaileigh will never know, but her free spirit and lust for life has gone on to inspire people to live again.

"My wish here is that her mom holds on to that and finds her own will to live without her child.

"In Amber's case I really saw the dangers of social media, and I want all teenagers to watch this film and realise there are consequences to their actions online.

"Parents are from a different generation, but they need to realise their kids are living a whole other life online and they need to monitor it. Ultimately this is a film about life and death and the internet. "It is about gaining empathy through seeing the grief.

"It also highlights how social media has the power to create positive change, as well as destroy people."

● *Timelines* will be screened at the Durban Film Festival on June 18 at noon; at Suncoast Casino NuMetro on June 22 at 8pm; and at the Sneddon Theatre on June 25 at 2pm. The Indie Karoo Film Festival screenings are on Sunday, July 3 at 1.30pm and 3.30pm at the Showroom Theatre. For more information: timelinesdocumentary.com/www.durbanfilmfest.co.za/www.indiekarooofilmfestival.com/selectedfilms2016.