

April 5, 2017

Augustana Senior Bound for Film School in NYC



Photo by Mike Shafer.

Rising filmmaker Maria Lavelle will study at New York University's prestigious Tisch School of the Arts, the country's preeminent center for the study of the performing, cinematic and emerging media arts, next fall.

As a child, Augustana senior [Maria Lavelle](#) spent months in a Norwegian hospital as doctors worked to treat a series of cystic tumors growing in her liver.

The sterile white walls of the hospital and the endless barrage of blood tests, IVs, x-rays and scans made it hard for the then-11-year-old Lavelle to find anything to smile about.

Then, something changed.

Lavelle discovered the power of movies. And in doing so, she found ways to leave the hospital.

She went to the Chocolate Factory with Charlie and Willy Wonka, she helped a tender-hearted Elliott build a machine to help E.T. phone home, and she watched in awe as Pippi Longstocking showed her magical powers.

Eventually, Lavelle's health improved and she even went on to develop an interest in running. When she came to Augustana in 2014, she did so as a student and as a member of the Augustana track team.

With a passion for storytelling, Lavelle majored in journalism. As a student at AU, she has worked as a reporter for the [Mirror](#), Augustana's student newspaper, and the [Edda](#), the Augustana yearbook. She also completed a journalism internship for *Haugesunds Avis*, the Norwegian regional newspaper.

[Dr. Janet Blank-Libra](#), professor of English and director of journalism at Augustana, called Lavelle someone who is “capable of empathizing with others and for that reason is capable of producing stories that represent others' realities deeply and truthfully.”

“Maria takes to her work a strong and somehow tangible emotional intelligence. She never judges; she is always open. She somehow empties herself of preconceptions before entering into conversation, something I have seen her do with her peers. Her capacity to relate to others authentically is one of her greatest strengths. She is a person of profound integrity. To her work she brings a formidable work ethic as well as considerable creative and critical abilities,” Blank-Libra said.

Despite the busy demands of college life, Lavelle's love of film continued. She never forgot how movies helped brighten a dark time in her life.

“As an adult, I (saw) that it was not Charlie, Pippi or Elliott themselves that inspired me — it was their stories. They were ordinary people on extraordinary journeys,” [she wrote on her blog](#).

Believing that “film is one of the mediums that still possesses the power to truly influence people,” Lavelle set out to “use my talents to tell stories.”

In 2016, she [teamed up with fellow student Sarah Kocher '16](#) to write, direct and produce “Over the Bridge,” a short documentary on homelessness in Sioux Falls.

The film packed a punch locally and went on to a number of national film festivals, earning

praise and awards along the way.

The experience further fueled Lavelle's desire to pursue a career in filmmaking.

In October, Lavelle took a chance on a dream and applied to the graduate film program at New York University's prestigious [Tisch School of the Arts](#), the country's preeminent center for the study of the performing, cinematic and emerging media arts.

She was accepted.

Lavelle was ecstatic, but also nervous — nervous because she had a problem.

She didn't have enough money to cover the cost of tuition at Tisch.

She talked with family members, mentors, professors and friends about what to do. To her surprise, in just a short time, dozens came forward with financial gifts to help Lavelle.

“To see that so many people care about me and my education is just incredibly touching and I'm so lucky to be surrounded by people who truly want to see me succeed. The past few days have shown me what the 'Augie Advantage' really means. It's not just that the faculty, administration and my classmates express their vocal encouragement, it's that they go out of their way to find solutions.”

— **Maria Lavelle**

Class of 2017

Next up, Lavelle will celebrate commencement in May. From there, she'll return to Norway to write for a local newspaper over the summer.

This fall, she'll begin the three-year graduate film program at Tisch, described as “an intensive three-year conservatory in the [Maurice Kanbar Institute of Film and Television](#) that trains students in the art of cinematic storytelling.”

She'll write, direct and produce multiple films and exercises, working with fellow students in a community located in the heart of New York City's Greenwich Village neighborhood.

“You basically live and breathe film,” Lavelle said. “It will be a lot of hard work, but it sounds amazing.”
