



The Hugs Project

An experiment on film

[Campus News](#) | Posted on April 18, 2017

By: Becky St. Clair

“People say I’m a good hugger. Hugs are one of the best ways to connect and show affection in general. You can throw yourself into a hug; embrace someone with your whole self and embrace their whole self.”

In fall 2015, Sarah Stelfox, senior liberal arts major, agreed to participate in an experiment for the purposes of a student-produced documentary called “The Hugs Project.” For 21 days Sarah was forbidden from hugging or touching anyone, including showing affection to her stuffed animals.

“I was heartbroken,” she says quietly. “It was very hard. There was a constant awareness that I wasn’t allowed to be affectionate to anyone and that was hard on my heart.”

Sarah has always enjoyed hugs. She admits that she comes from a family of huggers, growing up showing affection to anyone and everyone through sincere, meaningful hugs. People got used to Sarah and Hugs being synonymous. And when she wasn't allowed to hug anyone, it wasn't just hard on her; it was hard on her friends.

"People were really upset with me," she says. "They were upset with the filmmakers for 'making' me do it when I had clearly volunteered, and that made what I was doing that much harder."

Perhaps the biggest challenge to this experiment was the minor identity crisis it sparked.

"I didn't know who I was anymore," she says. "I liked being this person I suddenly couldn't be, and I didn't know who to be."

Sarah envied the two other volunteers in the documentary; due to their disinterest in physical affection their challenges were to hug a certain number of people every day--one of them people he knew, another people he didn't. She recalls that her body physically hurt from the stress of being devoid of physical affection.

"I need to have someone touching me," she says. "Someone to remind me that I'm real. To acknowledge that what I'm feeling is legitimate."

At the midnight hour when the 21 days were finally over, Sarah found herself very alone. Her sister and her best friend were both away from campus, and she wasn't sure where to go or what to do. She spent a lot of time crying.

"They asked me how I was feeling and what was going through my head," she says of the documentary producers. "I said, 'I don't know how I feel, but I *feel* again and this is good.'"

This experiment has changed the way Sarah approaches relationships. She is more aware of how she physically interacts with others and she's now able to more fully articulate to others what she's feeling.

"I treasure hugs more," she says. "They're special. This whole project helped me gain an understanding of comfort level for myself and others. I approach others with a bit more caution and remind myself that not everyone feels the same way I do about hugs. I don't want to make anyone feel uncomfortable."

What did this experience teach her about God?

"He and I talked a lot," Sarah says intently. "I used my imagination often because I had to remember what it was like to be fully embraced. Then I thought, if this is how a human hug feels, imagine being fully embraced by the creator of the universe. He does that. This realization was a beautiful moment. It sustained me."

Last week, "The Hugs Project" won Best Documentary Short at [Sonscreen](#) in Loma Linda, California. The film was directed by Stephen Allcock, produced by Maxine Murray and

Stephen Allcock and edited by Jeriah Richardson and Michael Young. Director of photography was Brian Tagalog. Two other Andrews University films were screened during the event; "Foreign Native," a film by Denae Keisz, Madai Villa, Kiana Gurley and Heidi Ramirez which won Audience Choice Award, and "Jackie: The Transformation Project," a documentary by University Health & Wellness, the Department of Visual Art, Communication & Design and Integrated Marketing & Communication.

Related Links

- [Watch the trailer](#) for "The Hugs Project"
- [What is Sonscreen?](#)
- [Documentary film at Andrews University](#)

Contact:

PR

pr@andrews.edu

269-471-3322