Dempsey Rice was 18 years old when her mother, Bonnie Rice, completed suicide on October 31, 1987. Just a freshman in college, Dempsey didn’t know what impact her mother’s death would have on her life. All she knew was that her mother was gone, and that there was a huge hole in her very being.

Dempsey finished college (Syracuse University) and graduate school (University of Manchester, in England). She was headed for a career in academia when she decided to switch course and become a film director. She apprenticed with several documentary filmmakers and then began to search for her own project to direct.

She realized, with a shock, that she was living her own documentary film. “I was looking for an idea that I could tell well and tell from a personal point of view,” she said, relaxing after a recent screening of the film in Los Angeles. “And, of course, the most defining moment in my life is my mom’s suicide.”

As she explains on her web-site: “I was 18 years old when my mother put a bullet in her head and changed my life forever. Her death, and my struggle to conquer the effects of her suicide, inform the fabric of my life – how I see, how I behave, and most importantly, how I feel. I fight the depression that is her legacy to me, commune with others who have suffered the suicide of an important person in their lives, and look for a resolution that I may never find.”

Dempsey’s feature film, entitled *Daughter of Suicide*, was three-and-a-half years in the making. At once moving and searing, living and devastating, personal and universal, the film premiered on HBO Signature on May 7, 2000, and aired on the network throughout the month of May. It was shown at the annual AAS conference in Los Angeles, and it’s also made the rounds of several prestigious film festivals, including the Munich International Documentary Film Festival, the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, and the Women Make Waves Film and Video Festival.

In the film, Dempsey uses her mother’s journal and interviews her family members to reconstruct her mother’s life. We watch Bonnie growing up in the South, a minister’s daughter, then marrying at a young age. We watch Bonnie and her husband, Ray, start their family in MacLean, VA, with the birth of Dempsey, their oldest child. We watch Bonnie suffer from post-partum depression after the birth of her second child. In 1980, when Dempsey was 11, Bonnie attempted suicide for the first time. Finally, after separating from her husband and experiencing severe depression, Bonnie completed suicide. She was 48 years old.

Dempsey says that she decided to make the film in part because she was unaware of other feature films about survivors’ experiences. “I started writing the film in January of ’96,” she says, “which was a very critical time in healing and getting through my mom’s death. I was going to support groups, and I had gone to an AAS Survivor conference in Richmond, Virginia. I read a book called *Motherless Daughters*, and I knew there was a fair amount of books [about suicide]. I knew there wasn’t a lot of film on the subject.”

The ability to talk about – and seek treatment for – mental illness is a theme that Dempsey emphasizes, in part because her mother didn’t reach out for such help. “My mother’s depression wasn’t a diagnosed illness,” says Dempsey. “She died and we realized [afterwards] how ill she’d been. Talking about mental illness, talking about suicide, is something that people have to work up to. We don’t want to talk about it – there is a stigma. I think people have to come out of the closet and say ‘I suffer from depression. I’m okay. I deal with it.’”

Throughout the film, we watch as Dempsey, her sister, her father, her grandmother, and other family members talk about their experiences as survivors and attempt to heal. Dempsey credits survivor support groups with helping her deal with her mother’s suicide – for two-plus years she attended twice-monthly sessions at Samaritan Safe Place in New York – and notes that, without her family’s cooperation, she couldn’t have made
the film. “I called my father first, and he was immediately supportive,” she says. “I was worried that my sister, Chrissie, wouldn’t want me to do it, but she was supportive. And then I went to my grandmother, and she was supportive. And then my mom’s siblings came on board. It was very hard for them – it was hard on all of us because the film and my mother’s suicide was the focus of my life for such a long period of time. I had to focus their attention on it.”

The making of the film enabled Dempsey to work through her conflicted, painful feelings about her mother’s suicide. “For a long time, I felt like I could never forgive her because I had so much anger and so much hatred and so much fear. And as that dissipated, the need to forgive dissipated. I no longer feel the need to forgive or not to forgive. Now, her death is integrated in my life. It’s a part of me and it doesn’t bring me constant pain.”

The film also forced Dempsey, now 31 years old and living in Brooklyn, New York, to confront her own personal demons. “When I first started working on this film, I was an angry person all the time. I had more hate than love,” she says. “Now I have more love than hate because I got treatment for my own illness. I think depression manifests itself in a lot of anger, and it did in my mom and it did in me. I think in treatment, a lot of that has dissipated.

“I don’t think that her death haunts my life anymore,” she continues. “It did for a long time, and a lot of the reason was because I became very obsessive over the details of her death, over the issues of why she died. Why that day – Halloween – the day of the dead? It was always there, like a monkey on my back, and it was making me sad and angry all the time. I don’t consider the awful details like I used to. Now, I have a very positive relationship with my mother. She’s my friend.”

The acclaim for Daughter of Suicide notwithstanding, Dempsey intends to take a break from the subject of suicide with her next project. She has begun to do necessary research and fund-raising for a documentary series about Southern story-telling – the folk tales and oral histories that emerged in her birthplace.

Daughter of Suicide is now available on video for purchase by survivors and survivor groups. Contact: Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway, Suite 500, New York NY 10013. Phone 212-925-0606. Web-site: www.wmm.com. You can also learn more about the film and Dempsey Rice at: www.daughterofsuicide.com or www.daughterone.net.