

# Bee SCENE



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*To:*

# How to Bee

*How To Bee* is a film by Naomi Mark, which follows the journey of her and her father Don over three beekeeping seasons as he passes his knowledge on to her, and they come to terms with his changing health. Through archival photographs and interviews with family, the film explores the history of Don's beekeeping in the Yukon and traces his journey in the present day, as he teaches Naomi how to keep bees after being diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). Part biography, part point-of-view documentary and part intro to beekeeping, *How To Bee* is a celebration of life in all stages, that depicts the journey of a father and daughter as they come to terms with the changing shape of their lives.

*We recently got in touch with Naomi about her film, and what follows is part of our conversation.*

My parents started their family in the village of Carmacks, a town of around 500 people, two hours North of Whitehorse along the Klondike Highway. My dad was American and came to Canada in 1967 after graduating from university, before receiving his draft notice for Vietnam.

I've been interested in bees since I was little, but mostly because it was part of my Dad's identity. He had a serious apiary from when I was a baby until I was about 6 years old, and it was one of those things about him that gave me pride as a kid – because it seemed so weird and cool to me. Although he was working a seasonal job at the time, my Dad had around 20 hives. He was one of the first to be able to sustain an apiary of that size in the Yukon. He capitalized on the fireweed burns and his hives were very productive, but after a few tragedies back to back, including both wolverines and bears destroying a significant portion of his



hives, he decided to take a break and focus on his family and the development of his bush property.

I am a professional filmmaker and have been working in film in a part or full-time capacity since 2008. I worked in television and film in Vancouver until 2015, when I moved North to take a break from the work and spend some time with my Dad. He was diagnosed with COPD in 2002 but hadn't made our family aware of it until 2012, when his illness became more obvious and he started to require oxygen support.

Since moving back to the Yukon my filmmaking career has picked up and I have moved into documentary filmmaking. In 2017 I resigned from my part time job as the Executive Director of the Screen Production Yukon Association, and incorporated a production company with my partner called Midnight Light Media.

We are hoping to have the Canadian premiere of *How to Bee* at the Available Light Film Festival in Whitehorse this February, but have applied to over 20 festivals worldwide. The film is also set to have its television premiere on the Knowledge Network next fall - we are negotiating the date at the moment, but are hoping for October.

*Do you have any early memories of your dad's bees?*

I do! The film actually starts with one of my most distinct memories of beekeeping in the early days. Though the memory is actually not mine, it's my dad's, it is one of those family stories that gets told so many times that it is impossible to separate story from memory. My dad had



taken me out with him to check on his hives and I was observing the honey bees coming in and out of the hive, and hanging out at the front of the hive. I watched their thoraxes pumping and said, “Hey dad, the bees breathe with their bums, hey?” Of course my dad thought that was pretty funny.

My own early memories are more sting-based. I remember my older brother poking a front entrance with a stick and me getting stung for it. I remember the sticky mess of the kitchen during extraction time, and chewing huge wads of cappings and honey mixed together and calling it bee gum. The smell of burning burlap is certainly a nostalgic one, that and warm honey air wafting out of the hand-cranked 10 frame extractor that I still use today.

*What was the impetus for the film - making something about your dad? Or did it start with him teaching you about beekeeping, and then you thought about making a film?*

In 2014, before I decided to come back home for an extensive visit, I was in Whitehorse in July to celebrate my Dad’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. After my Dad retired he had started dabbling in beekeeping again and was maintaining 2 – 4 hives. He asked me for help moving a hive while I was visiting, and it seemed like the first time he had ever asked me for that kind of help. We went on a late night hive-moving mission, and I lifted a hive for the first time; something about the experience felt really cool. We checked the hive the following day and I realized I really hadn’t learned much about beekeeping before then, and I also realized how much my dad was going to start to need help with the bees if he was going to continue doing it.

My dad had a very different adulthood than I did. He spent a long time living and working in the bush and I was always impressed and proud of all of his adventures, but as our family expanded his former hobbies and vocations like trapping, dog mushing and beekeeping took a back seat. My early childhood memories were speckled with pieces of those things, but I always felt that as my father’s daughter, I had missed out on learning them. Lifting that hive out of the back of the truck made me feel like I could maybe keep bees, and be a bit more like my dad after all.

The following summer I returned to the Yukon - I was sick of city and film contracting life in Vancouver and felt like I needed to spend some time away from that world to



get more grounded. I was in denial about my Dad’s illness but also thought that it would be a good opportunity to spend time with him – the project of learning to keep bees seemed like a good way to pitch in, but it also felt like a very deliberate way to spend some quality time with my dad, so I asked him to teach me. Being a filmmaker, I decided to film it. Part of me knew that time with my dad was limited so I needed to preserve it, and another part of me thought it would be fascinating being able to film the first person experience of someone learning to keep bees from scratch. I didn’t think the whole project through too much but felt like it would be a meaningful way to spend my time for a summer. In the end, we worked together for three summers, from 2015 – 2017, and I filmed every summer.

*Where are you at with bees now – do you have your own hives? If so are they the bees that your dad had? Are you hooked?*

I am still maintaining one of the hives that was from the apiary my dad and I were working together. When I first started learning from him he was maintaining an apiary of four. The last spring we had together in 2017, we opened the hives to realize that they had been completely overtaken by mites.

I remember the first mite I saw. I think it was the first my dad had ever seen in the Yukon. This was midway through the summer we started working together (2015). It was a really sunny day so I had pulled a frame out of our more docile hive and propped it up between two boxes so I could film some super close-up footage of the bees with a macro lens. I spotted a drone, recognizing the shape from the textbook my dad had recommended I read. The mite seemed huge sitting on the edge of a drone’s eye. I brought it over to my dad and he confirmed that’s what it was. The following summer, many Yukon beekeepers had mites, and there was much debate on how to treat for them.

My dad’s illness had progressed significantly by that time and he said that if we were to get new hives, they would have to be mine. I decided that I would get three. I’d definitely say I’m hooked and would love to continue to maintain 1 – 4 hives in a hobbyist capacity, but as my dad would often say, “life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans”, and life may lead me somewhere else. One thing is for sure, and that is that I would like to have bees when I settle down and have a family.

Beekeeping brought me closer to my dad in many ways and proved to be a wonderful way for me to connect with him. I definitely feel closer to him when I am working with my bees – though my dad was always far more impressed with my filmmaking abilities than my beekeeping abilities. I always hear him in my ear now, “You’re not gonna light the smoker? Slow down, you better light the smoker, don’t move too fast, careful!” It is comforting now to be with the bees and be able to think of what he would do in a particular situation, and to have those three years of working together for me to draw upon; that feels pretty special.

To see the trailer for the film, please visit [howtobee.ca](http://howtobee.ca). ❁