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MISSOULA

SPRING TEMPS AND SUNSHINE



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Christopher Fleeman, center, and Layne Fleeman, right, picnic with friends Jenna Hughes and Gwenevere Hughes on Thursday, Feb. 5, near the Clark Fork River in Missoula. Temperatures reached a record 51 degrees on Thursday and were expected to remain above average through the weekend.

Record-breaking warmth in the Garden City, across Montana

CORY WALSH
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Missoula saw record high temperatures this week that are projected to continue until a drop this weekend.

On Tuesday, Feb. 3, the area reached a record high of 52 degrees, according to Joe Messina, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Missoula. Wednesday dipped down slightly to 49 degrees. But Thursday reached 51 degrees, beating the previous record of 50 set in 1995, according to Weather.gov. The trend could continue through Friday, with a forecast high of 58.

Looking back at January, Messina said the average daily highs of 37.4 degrees made for the seventh-warmest January from the period of 1948 to 2026. The warmest January overall in that span was 1953, when the average daily high was 43.3 degrees.

Regarding precipitation, January 2026 saw .57 inches, while 1981 was significantly more arid at 0.16.

Starting this weekend, he said people can expect temperatures to decrease, with daytime highs in the 40s, which is still 5 to 10 degrees above normal, he said.

There could be small amounts of precipitation that will likely come in the form of rain in the valley.

As previously reported in the Missoulian, December 2026 was the warmest ever in the Garden City.

Cory Walsh is the arts and entertainment reporter for the Missoulian.

BIG SKY DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

New film tells story of Linnea Mills

Missoula teen died scuba diving in Glacier

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A Missoula filmmaker's heart-wrenching, comprehensive documentary about the life of a young Missoula woman and her death in a terrible scuba diving incident in Glacier National Park will make its world premiere at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival on Feb. 14.

Titled "How to Kill a Mermaid: The Linnea Mills Story," the film is an intense, sad, horrifying investigation into what happened and the fallout, including the agonizing grief experienced by her parents, brother and all who knew her.

But it's also a deeply-inspiring tribute that will surely leave few dry eyes inside the Wilma Theater.

And for the documentary's creator, Damon Ristau, the subject matter is deeply personal.

Incident

Linnea Rose Mills was a jubilant, empathetic, adventurous 18-year-old graduate of Hellgate High School and Willard Alternative High who had dreams of becoming a marine biologist.

Please see MILLS, Page A2



LISA MILLS MAUNEY

Linnea Mills at her graduation from Hellgate High School. She also attended Willard Alternative High School.

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Mills

From A1

On Nov. 1, 2020, she traveled to attend a scuba certification training class at Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park.

The class was led by instructor Debbie Snow of Gull Dive Missoula, and it was for certification through PADI, the Professional Association of Diving Instructors.

Snow did not follow a number of well-established safety protocols, to say the least, for several different aspects of the training class, including allowing Mills to dive with too much weight and without a crucial piece of equipment that would have allowed Linnea to add air, and thus life-saving buoyancy, to her dry suit.

The film meticulously covers the egregious errors and actions on the part of Snow that led, ultimately, to Mills sinking to below 100 feet deep in the freezing cold waters of Lake McDonald as the sun went down, and as other students in the class, none of whom were expert divers, furiously tried to help or figure out what was going on and to alert Snow.

Mills died that night, and her passing sent shockwaves through the Missoula community and around the world. She was described as joyful and curious, a world-traveler and a person who knew from an early age that she wanted to be around water and wildlife. And she wanted to contribute.



Linnea Mills diving in Australia.

PROVIDED



Linnea Mills with her mother, Lisa Mills Mauney, in Scotland. Linnea traveled the world as a youngster.

LISA MILLS MAUNEY

Questions

Linnea's parents, Lisa Mills Mauney and Scott Mills, and Linnea's brother Nick Mills, are featured heavily in the film, and their distress is palpable.

Ristau, the filmmaker, said his daughter was best friends with Linnea as well. Immediately, as questions began to arise about Snow's actions that night and about gaps in the federal investigation conducted by the National Park Service's Investigative Services Branch, Ristau began contemplating what he could do.

"It was a really tough time, and I had been thinking about this project pretty much shortly after she died when we realized it was not just a random occurrence," Ristau said. "This wasn't an accident, per se, like everyone thought initially. As some of the details started coming out, and we realized this was ultimately 100% preventable, it just frustrated me."

He decided there was a lot of information that just wasn't coming out, and there were a lot of things many people didn't understand about the technical side of diving and how Linnea died.

Ristau, a longtime local documentary filmmaker, decided to begin putting footage and interviews together.

"And then we had been in touch with the family," he said. "And I went to her funeral with my daughter and it just rocked us, the whole community. Linnea was so well-loved, had so many friends and family. It was just a devastating tragedy."

The film starts out recapping Linnea's early life and how she was always attracted to water. It then goes (preceded by an explicit warning) into detail about the fateful incident, because one of the students happened to be wearing a video camera the entire time.

The next part of the film recounts the legal battle and investigation that followed, and features a maritime lawyer named David Concannon who helped the family uncover huge gaps in the federal investigation. (The family ultimately settled a civil lawsuit against Gull Dive, its owners, the instructor and PADI out of court for undisclosed terms.) The film goes into detail about how criminal charges were never brought against Snow. Snow is on a list of instructors who have been expelled from PADI.

Aftermath

Linnea's parents explain in the film that they don't believe justice has been served, and they've made it their mission to try to prevent similar deaths.

"I couldn't have done the film without the Mills family," Ristau said. "They helped with just being open books. They want her story out there just as much as anyone."

The documentary includes storytelling as well as investigative and explanatory journalism aspects.

"I wanted to make the film not only to honor Linnea, and have this tribute to her as a person and as an adventurous spirit, but also to then explain the technical side of diving and things to the audience," Ristau said. "How she died is not very straightforward for people who aren't experts, so I wanted to explain the ins and outs of that. And then jumping into the legal side of things, explaining the case."

In Ristau's words, the film is part true-crime, part biography, part deep-dive look into things that were overlooked in the investigation.

At a little over two-hours, Ristau said the Missoula audience will see the "director's cut," because he didn't want to leave out details for the local community.

"It's been brutal," he said. "It's been a very, very difficult project for me and my family. But also in a way, it's been cathartic. My hope is it will continue sharing her story and legacy and hopefully help the healing process."

He said there were a lot of tears shed during the editing and filming process.

"It's been a long two-and-a-half years," he added. "But I feel good about it. I've been doing this for 20 years, and this is the most complex, personal story. I hope people take away from this film who Linnea was. I don't want people to think it's about anything other than Linnea. It's to honor her. And secondarily, I hope people see that some changes need to be made in this industry. I hope instructors look at this and approach the work with more caution."

Ristau said he's proud to be showing the film at the Big Sky Doc Fest.

Scott Mills, Linnea's father, a longtime wildlife biology professor at the University of Montana, said Ristau treated the whole project with tenderness, dedication and rigor.

"I hope people take away from this film that Linnea was truly a remarkable person," he said. "This whole incident has created a great stir in the diving community."

Mills is glad that divers across the world have taken notice of what went wrong, but he also didn't want Linnea to be reduced to a one-dimensional story. He's glad the film portrays who she was in her entirety.

"Her death was devastatingly unnecessary," Mills said.

He hopes the film prevents other deaths, and he noted that another young 12-year-old Texas girl was recently killed in a diving class incident.

"It's gotta stop somehow," he said. "And the only way to make it stop is to hold the scuba diving industry accountable. That's really what we've wanted since Nov. 1, 2020. Telling Linnea's story, her beautiful story, and exposing the industry. It's unregulated and chaotic. It's an unaccountable, money-making machine."

Mills said he "spent 1,000 days in the trenches" investigating the circumstances of his daughter's death, and he's working on a book.

"I had no idea," he said about the diving industry. "People think it all looks very safe and very official and that there must be stringent standards. To discover that not only that's not there, but there's a cover-up, it's really astonishing."

The film also explores how the tragedy impacted the family and contributed to the end of Scott and Lisa's marriage.

Lisa Mills Mauney, Linnea's mom, said Ristau was able to fill in many of the previous gaps in the publicly-available facts about her daughter's death.

"The film is a beautiful tribute to Linnea, heartbreaking as it is to watch," she said. "The big takeaway of the film is that Linnea's death demonstrates that the corporate model of the PADI certification training system, within the self-regulated scuba industry, did not prevent a certified PADI instructor from failing to adhere to the standards she was trained to adhere to when providing instruction. The film features accounts of how attempts were made to shift the blame for Linnea's death back onto Linnea and onto Bob Gentry, another student in the class who valiantly tried to save Linnea's life."

Lisa said that Linnea was 18 and trusted her instructor.

"Linnea tracked everything she needed to bring that day and everything she was asked to do by her instructor to prepare for the day she died," she said. "The truth of what happened that led up to Linnea's death, and what happened in the aftermath of her death, plays out in front of us in this film. Please watch and think about Linnea. This should not be her story."

Mills Mauney described her daughter as a "bright shiny person" who worried as a little girl about how everyone around her was feeling. In her first swimming lessons, she was focused on helping other kids who were struggling.

"She was like that," Mills Mauney said. "A helper. She turned every day into an adventure, but she also was such a hard worker from a young age. A lifeguard, babysitter, working in restaurants, saving up to buy her own car and renting her own place. Owning and caring for her own dog. She had big dreams and wrote them in her daily journal. She was going places with her life. Her life was cut short but I must say that she did live fully in the time she had on Earth."

Mills Mauney said she is filled with gratitude for being Linnea's mother.

"I am sorry I do not get to see her change the world like she hoped to while she was alive. Maybe her story will make a difference now though."

She saw the documentary as well.

"In a way I knew I needed to prepare myself and work through my reactions before I could handle sitting with the public during the film," she said. "My mind knew she was gone, but there she was, alive in front of me on the screen. It is hard and also so beautiful. I really miss her."

A big section in the film explores the decision by prosecutors to not file criminal charges against Snow.

"I do feel that in a fair and just system the federal government would reopen the investigation, collect all of the evidence we now know does exist, have a set of appropriate experts review all of the evidence, and then determine if Linnea's death case merits that criminal charges be brought forward," Mills Mauney said. "There also is a question of potential obstruction of justice regarding the dive computer that was never turned into evidence."

Redemption

The film ends on a deeply inspirational note. Linnea's brother Nick, in the aftermath of his sister's tragedy, decided he wanted to learn to dive well enough to be able to dive in Lake McDonald on the anniversary of her death.

He went through a rigorous process to learn how to dive safely, including an entire semester of cold-water diving in Alaska. Scott Mills joined Nick for the initial certification.

It would be hard to describe the emotions that are shown by all the participants in the documentary in the film's final scenes, as Nick unveils a banner in Linnea's honor deep underwater in Lake McDonald at the spot where she passed away.

Nick Mills, Linnea's brother, told the Missoulian he'll be in town from Oregon for the premiere along with his parents.

"Anyone who knows me knows that I'm not the most vocal," he said. "For me, diving has been the crucial way to go through the grieving process. I'm not sure I'd be able to do it any other way. Being able to complete the dive was a full-circle moment for me along with anyone who cared about Linnea."

He's especially glad that Bob Gentry, a student diver who tried to help Linnea that fateful day, was able to be there on the shore of the lake for the tribute dive and perhaps get some healing.

Nick Mills said there's a lot of accountability that needs to happen in the diving industry. One of the main tenets of the documentary is that PADI is focused on churning out certifications and instructors, because it makes money, rather than ensuring strict standards for safety.

"There's millions of divers in the United States, and there's millions of people diving," he said. "A 12-year-old girl in Texas recently died due to improper instructor supervision. I hope one takeaway that people have from this film is that there needs to be some major changes in the dive industry. The film hinges on some things, some ways that can happen. So hopefully Linnea gets justice."

Mills said he's glad he'll be able to see the film's debut and says it will be "the Missoula community rallying for Linnea."

The film plays at 3:30 p.m. on Feb. 14 at the Wilma Theater. The film has been nominated in the Big Sky Award competition by festival judges.

For more information and tickets, visit bigskyfilmfest.org/schedule/2026-schedule/2026/02/14.

For more information on Linnea's legacy promoting environmental sustainability, equality and justice, visit thelinneafoundation.org.

David Erickson is the business reporter for the Missoulian.

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