

Baby, it's cold inside

by Dale Burg and Abby Hirsch

Before her father was frozen Gillian Cummings was just another 17-year-old actress without an act.

But by the time she came into our p. r. office some two years later all that had changed. She showed up in what we came to recognize as her trademark ensemble: boots, tights, fleece jacket, bullet-pocked cowboy hat, and a fringed leather skirt the length of a Benson and Hedges long. By way of introduction, she presented her theatrical resume—the novice's usual motley credits plus a green belt in judo and a repertoire of trick voices which included a rhinoceros and cats, "Siamese and regular." But what specifically brought her to us was in the film canister she was carrying. It contained a short feature film she had made of her late father's freezing. And she wanted some publicity for it.

This wasn't the first time we'd been approached on the subject of cryonics. Last year, a man had come into the office with a franchising idea that involved a roving fleet of re-conditioned Good Humor trucks and emergency freezing way-stations. "Think of it," he'd enthuse. "You'd drop dead on Third Avenue and we'd just stick you in the freezer at P. J. Clarke's." Irrespective of questions of taste, the whole plan was simply too far-fetched. Gillian, on the other hand, really had something to sell. Intrigued, we offered our assistance.

She explained that shortly before her father's untimely death two years ago, the family had informally agreed on cryonic suspension for each in lieu of a more conventional burial. Why Gillian's father chose freezing is not a matter of record. The would-be cryonauts who are still around to be interviewed tout its most obvious benefit: the chance for a second fling.

Who wants to be frozen? "Greedy people—like me," says 29-year-old Brooke Battalia, a Consumer Reports market analyst and contributor to Immortal-

ity, the cryonics newsletter. Baruch College student Stanley Blecker thinks freezing would be "the most exciting trip of all time." Stephen Mandell, struck fatally ill in his early 20s, made his own arrangements for freezing despite his mother's initial skepticism. "If you have even the smallest chance to come back, why shouldn't you take it?" Mandell asked his mother. "He had so much faith in mankind and the future," she recalls. "Who was I to say no?"

Other cryonauts, marinating peacefully at minus 320 fahrenheit in their liquid nitrogen-filled tanks (think of a giant stainless steel thermos bottle), were less passionate in their conviction. "I had spoken with my father about it. He had had a stroke and hadn't regained most of his faculties, but I gathered he was in favor. He didn't want to be buried and couldn't see cremation; he regarded this as the least of the evils. 'This freezing stuff sounds like it might not be bad,' he said. I couldn't call him enthusiastic," says Paul Hurst, Jr., whose father shares the dual capsule in Farmingdale, Long Island, with Herman Greenberg, father of Gillian. (She claims Greenberg is a bogus name, used as a cover to keep news of the freezing from reaching the rest of her family. She's reverting to Cummings because "now's the time to bring it in the open.") Also in there with Hurst and Greenberg/Cummings is an ice cream freezer filled with placenta, the raw material of another experiment in life extension. The whole set-up is under the auspices of Curtis Henderson of the New York Cryonics Society, the man Gillian rang up immediately following her father's demise.

Intrigued by Robert Ettinger's seminal book, "The Prospect of Immortality," Henderson was among the pioneers who'd worked in Arizona during the mid-'60s with Ed Hope, inventor of the prototype capsule. Henderson was present at the world's first freezing, where the experimenters were so eager to get to work that they forgot to close the corpse's eyes. (Reports months later exclaimed over how brightly they still shone.)

An attorney, Henderson has spent the better part of the last

few years devoted to the Cryonics Society and his company, Cryo-Span, a freezing operation in which Gillian is a participant. He issues a newsletter, answers inquiries to the society, and oversees the bodies for which he's now responsible. Only the two remain since a recent schism in which an offshoot group broke its ties with Henderson, taking their capsules with them.

When he got the call from Gillian, Henderson went to Philadelphia and made arrangements for Greenberg's immediate and temporary storage in a lined box filled with dry ice. Eleven months later, the body was transferred to its permanent storage space in the capsule.

Making a virtue of calamity, Gillian recorded her father's transfer as a short subject. The film she was carrying, was written, directed, narrated, and photographed by Gillian (who also makes a cameo appearance), and features her father as The Body. Her hope that the film could help pay for the costs of freezing (\$8500 down, \$1000 a year for maintenance) and, not incidentally, spur her acting career through publicity, reflects her generally pragmatic approach. Likewise, the far-off possibilities of eventual resuscitation are of less interest to her (though like all cryonics advocates, she thinks that inevitably science will find a way) than the plain fact she couldn't bear to have her father buried. "When I pass a cemetery, I don't see the flowers and grass. I see the decomposition going on underground. I had constant nightmares until I saw my father in the capsule."

Her sensibilities are not offended, however, by showing the film on television talk shows or arranging for its theatrical distribution. "You might book it with 'Clockwork Orange,'" she suggests. "You probably wouldn't run it with 'Pinocchio.'" Joe Franklin got the message: he refused the film for his morning show. "I follow 'Romper Room,'" he explained. "It might frighten the kiddies."

There were other stumbling blocks. Gillian called Long John Nebel about appearing on his show and got his answering device. "Do not be afraid," said the voice of Long John, asking for a message. "I am not afraid," said Gillian, leaving one. Long John never called back.

Lee Leonard of "Mid-day" couldn't resist a reference to a



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popsicle. Gillian was unruffled. "Sure, it lends itself to one-liners. So do very short skirts and cowboy hats with bullet holes."

On the whole, the media were intrigued. Gillian made a guest appearance for 27 minutes of Frost on frost. McCandlish Phillips of the Times mused over his story lead: "Many are cold, but few are frozen."

Not only Gillian but, to a remarkable degree, all the cryonics people are interested in—even eager for—publicity. Even the advertising brochure for Cryo-Span ("Cryonic suspension is for you!") lists among the regular services—along with pre-suspension counseling and initial cool-down of the body, etc.—"handling of publicity in accordance with the family's wishes." Clearly, you aren't dealing with Forest Lawn.

Henderson says almost everyone begins by saying they don't want publicity. "You take them at their word. Then they see somebody else getting some. . . ." He throws up his hands.

Even Nicholas de Blasio, a 48-year-old Catholic widower whose wife's consecrated capsule is reportedly hung with her photo and a collection of greeting cards, had succumbed. At first he was reluctant to speak with us, but finally gave in. Throughout the interview, he seemed to be going through something of an ordeal in speaking about what was obviously a sensitive subject. Then he mentioned quite casually that he'd been on the Frost show, done Virginia Graham, spoken to UPI, and recently taped "The American Dream Machine." So had Mrs. Mandell, now cooperating with some film-makers doing a documentary about her son.

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Gillian's Joseph E. Levine approach began to seem less strange. So we accepted an invitation to visit her father's capsule, stored along Long Island's cemetery row in an industrial bay which also houses a vault company and antique manufacturers. By Gillian's account the neighbors are proud to be associated with a pioneering venture.

Curtis Henderson was there to show us inside. A 40ish, brawny man of medium height, he wore a leather jacket with the New York Cryonics Society shoulder patch. The design, a phoenix rising from the ashes, he had personally copied off a police car door in Phoenix, Arizona. (It bothers Gillian that the phoenix is not rising from a block of ice, rather than from ashes.)

We entered the first of two rooms, where a dummy's head eerily emerges from a horizontal demonstration capsule. Otherwise, the room is unpretentious to the point of impoverishment; even Jessica Mitford might approve. As Gillian combs her hair, then sets up lights for a photographic session, her mother discusses Gillian's most recent television appearance. "She looked so nice. Gillian rarely wears makeup, but they did it so well. It's just too bad her father couldn't have seen her."

The nine-foot-tall capsule in which Gillian's father is located is in the second room. Encircled by a narrow platform, it is held vertical by a truss of silver-painted two-by-fours. The wall behind it is covered with an enormous enlargement of a photo of the moon, sold by Earth magazine as wall paper. Part of it is peeling to reveal a back wall of bare wood and insulating material. The room is small and cluttered with scraps of wood, cartons of aluminum foil, and the apparatus of the transfer. "I personally like this place,"

Gillian tells us. "It's cozy."

Henderson points out that all

that's required is to keep the capsule protected; a luxurious viewing room isn't a necessity. (Another optional expenditure: a window in the capsule.) We had already seen Gillian's father on film, modestly foil-wrapped from neck to toe, as he was slid into the capsule. ("There was a dramatic moment that doesn't really come across in the movie," she told us. "Until the actual moment of the transfer, we weren't sure he would fit.") But the urge to mount the platform, lift the lid, and look down at the top of Gillian's father's head remained. Yet when the invitation to do so finally came, we demurred.

Later Gillian and Curtis discuss cryonics further, while Mrs. Greenberg sips a strawberry ice cream soda. Henderson points out that cryonics advocates are really involved in the extension of life in general—the same things people have been up to since the Egyptians. Freezing is only part of the picture. Among scientists engaged in other areas of research, he mentions one whose particular interest is the alchemy of life-prolonging potions. ("Don't use his salve," volunteers Gillian. "It makes your hair fall out.")

Since technology can't yet extend life eternally, freezing serves in the breach; but its sheer novelty has brought it all the attention. Henderson discusses various experiments with freezing and thawing, noting that the latter process is trickier. And since no one has proved conclusively that it can be done, some scientists feel cryonic suspension is sensationalism, merely an attempt to separate people from their money.

Yet though various entrepreneurs thought freezing would make a billion, it hasn't. Hen-

derson's own profit possibilities seem marginal, at best, despite the fact that the capsule he sells is not cheap; but it must be custom produced, and the liquid nitrogen, except in vast quantities, is expensive. To someone who really wants himself or a loved one frozen, of course, money is no object. "You should spend money on the living, someone told me, I told her I did—I spent it on my piece of mind. That stopped her—cold," Gillian wryly notes.

"It wouldn't have made much difference if I couldn't have afforded it," says Nicholas de Blasio. "I'd have done it anyway." His was a gesture of concern for his wife. "I didn't think about freezing for myself. I applied it to someone very close to me. I think it's an ideal situation for mankind. It gives us hope. Without hope, what are we?" Does he plan to be frozen? "What kind of a man would I be if I had that done to my wife and not myself?" Though he paid less to Henderson, he estimates freezing by California-based Bob Nelson, Henderson's chief competitor, might run as much as \$20,000, including some maintenance. We mentioned in passing that the expense hardly made the procedure democratic. "Look," he protested, "we'd love

to freeze everyone for nothing."

Clearly, they can't. So as a practical matter, cryonics groups advise taking out life insurance policies to cover the initial expenses and provide a small trust for maintenance. One might take some precautions; Henderson estimated that quite a few people who want to be frozen never are, "because of the children, because of the publicity, or because nobody ever liked them very much anyway." An appropriately written policy would help guarantee a chance at immortality.

"Insurance men hover around us like bats. Something appears in the papers about preparing for freezing and right away 50 of them come fluttering around," sighs Saul Kent, Henderson's partner. The 32-year-old writer is past editor of three years' worth of bound volumes of *Immortality* (he ceased publication when rising costs indicated a cut in quality would be necessary), and a recent staffer at *Sexology*. "Today, in fact, an insurance man is taking me to the Playboy Club. I think he's trying to impress me."

Some of the cryonics societies' activities revolve around raising funds to keep people frozen and foster research for bringing them back, but most present activity is supported by relatives of the deceased. Paul Hurst, Jr., is hedging on making permanent financial arrangements for the care of his father's capsule, preferring to wait and see. "After all, the whole freezing thing could go piffle."

He points out that Henderson, "whom I'd trust with my life," is having financial difficulties. "A wave of freezing came around and Curtis thought it was going to take off; he spent some money on publicity, making trips, things like that. I don't think he's gotten a nickel out of it personally." It was partially money problems that caused the split between the CSNY and its offshoots: the Society for the Advancement of Cryonics Sciences (to stimulate research) and its adjunct, Cryonics Unlimited (an advisory organization). The schism was spearheaded by Nicholas de Blasio and Pauline Mandell. "Mrs. Mandell will tell you that Curtis Henderson is responsible for everything back to the Boer War," we were warned. Not quite; but she was thoroughly offended by his style. "When funds began running low some months ago, he came to us and said there was no more money for the nitrogen. 'Do we let the bodies rot?' he asked."

Moreover, "Stephen and Nick's wife were stored in a cemetery and Curtis came to visit at midnight or 1 a. m. with lots of people, turning the place into a three-ring circus. Didn't he offer to show you the bodies first thing? Sure. To Curtis, this is his accomplishment." Financial disagreement plus dissension over where to put the capsules when they were forced to leave the cemetery caused Mr. de Blasio and Mrs. Mandell to switch their allegiance to Bob Nelson on the West Coast. "This," says Mrs. Mandell, "is Mr. Cryonics himself."

We didn't get to meet Mr. Cryonics on his recent trip to New York, where he spent time making house calls on the relatives of his "patients" (the preferred word), but passions between his supporters and Henderson's run high, with each accusing the other of crimes running the gamut from financial mismanagement to body-snatching. Gillian reported that relish the dark rumor that Nelson's latest client is charged \$500 for each "viewing" of his frozen mother. This is evidently running into a sizable amount since the son, a dutiful Midwes-

terner, has reportedly returned several times to bring in some of his mother's effects—including jewelry and a padded bra, with which he bedecked the capsule. (Gillian obligingly drew us a diagram, based on a photo she saw.) For her side, Mrs. Mandell claims that Henderson agreed to freeze a body that had already been buried, but which a family member insisted be dug up.

Even before the open split, cryonics society meetings had presented the problems posed by any heterogeneous group. Members range from young people to the elderly, with no particularly typical traits. "I guess the only generalization you could make is that an awful lot of them have built bomber fallout shelters—they have a survival orientation," notes Paul Hurst. An annual convention supplements sporadic regional meetings where a great deal of time, notes Henderson with resignation, is consumed in discussing the refreshments for the next get-together.

Caring for a frozen relative is a time-consuming proposition, according to Mrs. Mandell. Even Gillian, whose father is in a newer model capsule which doesn't require a 24-hour pump that must be watched, visits with some regularity. "I like to check the boil-off rate and the level in the capsule," she says. "It's a scientific interest that makes me go."

Does a relative's obligation go beyond mere maintenance? Would a spouse, for example, remarry—knowing that his wife or her husband might some day revive? De Blasio, who is reserving the other half of his wife's capsule for himself, won't presume to predict the future by denying any such possibility, "but the lady in question would have to be a special person who knew about cryonics and me." Mrs. Greenberg can foresee remarriage for herself, and possibly even, some day, for her husband.

"He'd be young. He could have a second life. If he comes back, well and good."

If the pragmatic possibilities of freezing and thawing are fascinating, the moral questions are even more so. Religious resistance runs the range from Jewish doctrine about being buried in a pine box to the kind of fundamentalism Brooke Battalia has encountered: "If God wanted us to fly, he'd have given us wings. That kind of thing." But numbers of clergymen have spoken at cryonics meetings, giving suspension their nod of approval. And De Blasio sought and got the acceptance of the Roman Catholic Church, which decreed that "only God knows when a body is really dead." That approval cheered De Blasio: "If it's good enough for the Roman Catholic Church, I think the Cryonics Society is traveling in a select circle."

Three Italian journalists interviewing Henderson came to the inevitable question about the soul. He told them he was glad they'd asked, that in fact he'd given the soul some consideration. He would attend to the soul for only a dollar extra.

An even more pressing question is that of over-population. If there isn't enough room for us now, how can you justify freezing people and—theoretically, at least—adding to the future crush? Cryonics advocates shrug that one off. By the time scientists lick the thawing problem, they'll surely have coped with the population crisis. To Curtis Henderson, it's all irrelevant. "If you're worried about over-population," he says, "shoot yourself." And doubtless he'll be glad to take over from there.