

“It was a privilege to be able to give Leo a platform to tell his story”

IDENTITY, FAMILY, AND THE DOCUMENTARY *I AM LEO*

A CONVERSATION WITH KEZ MARGRIE*

You produced the documentary I am Leo with Nine Lives Media. How did you find Leo? How did you know that he was the right person to introduce a transgender story for young viewers?

Margrie: I'd wanted to commission a *MY LIFE* film about a transgender child for a while. We know how much comfort “seeing people like me” in the media brings to children who feel like they are on the outside, and so it felt appropriate and important that we made a film like this.

So, when Nine Lives Media came to me with Leo, all the pieces fell into place.

In the past, when we have been pitched this idea, further investigation has left me feeling uneasy about the circumstances the child and their family are in. We knew that being on CBBC would throw the child into the eye of the tabloids and potential

negative press so any child we filmed with needed to be robust and have a strong support network to carry them through.

Leo had all these things – he had already appeared on a very high-profile Breakfast TV show, and a well-known

tabloid had already done a negative piece about him being one of the youngest people in Britain to be taking hormone blockers. Leo has a wonderfully supportive family and his mother in particular is an amazing woman, who we knew would be there with Leo all the way. Most importantly of all, he WANTED to tell his story. Leo was 13 when we first started filming, so the perfect age for 6- to 12-year-olds – cool, but still a kid.

Before fully commissioning we introduced the family to a psychologist who is expert in assessing robustness when thrown into the public eye. She felt that Leo and his family had already gone through so much that appearing in a positive film on CBBC

would add no more stress than they had gone through already. And so we commissioned. We also ensured that other trans people featured in the film, had the right support, and understood the potential ramifications of being involved.

What were the specific thoughts and discussions you had with your team about how to deal with the issue of transgender?

Margrie: We decided very early on that this was to be a film about “identity” – an issue that so many children are dealing with, one way or another, and so a “way in” to Leo’s particular story. This was never going to be a film about anatomy or operations or deal in any way with sexuality. This was Leo’s film about his life. Whenever we commission a *MY*

LIFE film we are very clear with the production company that however old the child featured, whatever the issue we are portraying, the storytelling needs to be appropriate and relevant to all children we reach through our content on CBBC – 6- to 12-year-olds.

The passport story was interesting. What was the background story of the name change?

Margrie: The best *MY LIFE* films have at their heart a genuine unfolding of events, and we were missing that in Leo's story. It was only when the production company was sorting out Leo's visit to an older trans-youth woman in Scotland [all internal flights require ID] that Leo happened to mention he hated his passport because it still had him down as a FEMALE! This was then the story that we were able to follow – Leo's quest to get his passport changed. He now has a genuine memento from his time being filmed for CBBC (along with a BAFTA, of course!).

Were there any critics of the programme? How do you answer criticism directed at covering this story for children?

Margrie: Yes, there were critics – but many of the complaints came from people who had seen the publicity around the film before it transmitted, objecting to the idea as opposed to objecting to the content of the film itself. We had anticipated there would be some negative comments and we briefed our press team and complaints unit on best practices. We worked very

It was a groundbreaking film in so many ways and it was a privilege to be able to give Leo a platform to tell his story. We also had overwhelmingly positive responses from parents and young people who are trans but also other people who wanted to wish Leo well.

What is your advice for other producers and directors who want to tell difficult stories about children and their identities for a young audience?

Margrie: It's an amazing privilege to work on the *MY LIFE* series – I'm always in awe of the children who are happy to share their stories.

In terms of advice – in the *MY LIFE* films we have to be very careful about how much of a child's story

we tell, in order to ensure that their entire experience is a positive one. Even if a piece of information about them

would make the film more exciting, if featuring that information is not in the interest of the child, we will not include it.

We always ensure that the children we feature "own" the film they are in and get to tell the story they want to tell. This might sound obvious, but in reality, for us as producers, it's amazing how easy it is to forget that we're working with real children and dipping into their lives.

Leo is an amazing, strong and inspiring young man and the film was a worthy winner of a BAFTA this year. ■

The interview was conducted by Krysten Stein and Stephanie Talbot.

closely with Leo and his mum regarding his use of social media and talked them through the CBBC guidelines.

THE AUTHOR

**Kez Margrie is a director, and executive producer of Independents at CBBC. She is most known for The Wrong Trainers (2006), Operation Ouch!, Junior Vets and the MY LIFE series.*

