

“When being transgender isn’t a taboo, these children can more easily express themselves”

TRANSGENDER YOUTH, CHILDREN’S RIGHTS, THE NETHERLANDS, AND HOW KY TURNED INTO NIELS

A CONVERSATION WITH ELS VAN DRIEL*

Your website reads, “inherit your child’s eyes and look through them”. Why do you feel called to share the child’s experience rather than adults’?

van Driel: Because, and this is almost obligatory, children see the world in an open, unprejudiced way. They have more originality and creativity towards the challenges of life and most importantly: they show us a righteous world is possible and just don’t think in terms of power and ego like adults.

How did you first get involved with the documentary series Just Kids about children’s rights?

van Driel: I worked as a documentary researcher at the Ecumenical Broadcasting Company IKON television in Holland. The idea of making short films about children’s rights was from, amongst others, Maartje Baker. These 3-minute films were made for adults. After 3 years, I suggested that we should make these films for children themselves. And maybe make them a bit longer as well. I got the chance

to make a pilot about a Chinese boy that officially didn’t exist. The film was *Feifei – Hide and seek*.

Then I suggested we also make films abroad. Dutch children needed to get a window to the world. But, of course, there was no budget to make these films. So I said I would go by myself with

a microphone, do some field research, and then we would shoot the film in one week. Off to India I went ...

Where did the idea for How Ky turned into Niels begin?

van Driel: It was our researcher Saskia Fris who found Sterre (another

transgender child) on a local television program. She contacted Sterre, who told us that she recently had met Ky. And so we visited Ky, and I thought that he was the perfect protagonist.

How did you select Niels, Sterre, and their secondary school class for the documentary short?

van Driel: Well, actually it was quite surprising that they went to the same school and were in the same class. I thought it was very special to be there on their third school day when they would tell their class about being transgender.

The evening prior to that I went to a parent-teacher meet-

ing for the class in which the school principal explained why we would be filming in their class. The parents’ reaction was to be very supportive of Niels and Sterre. I was quite surprised that everyone was so positive. It says a lot about the spirit of people from that region in the north of Holland.

INTERVIEW

What were the challenges in directing How Ky turned into Niels?

van Driel: The only thing that didn't turn out as I wanted it to, was that I wanted to film the medical part of the transformation at the VU university hospital. They didn't allow any cameras. Their concern was that transgender children might not be happy with a film about themselves during their transformation when they are older. I could understand that.

But my own feeling was that, for Niels, it was very important to tell his story. He never regretted being the subject of this film. Actually, he is very proud and has received nothing but positive responses.

Niels himself was such a great person to work with: funny, naughty, sweet, open, and sensitive. It was very special for me to be this close to his transformation into Niels. But it was sometimes heartbreaking to see his sadness. For instance, when he broke down in the classroom. But at the same time I felt glad that I was there with him. After the breakdown we sat down together for some time before he got hold of himself and bravely mingled with the other children again.

Did How Ky turned into Niels receive any criticism? If so, how did you respond?

van Driel: Not that I heard of, actually. But maybe they wouldn't tell the director!

At the first showing of the film at Cinekid film festival, the room was filled with family members of Niels. After the film many of them came to me, crying, hugging me and saying thanks because it helped them accept the name change. It was a bit like a funeral *and* a baptism of a newborn.

Do you have any advice for other producers and directors who want to tell transgender youth narratives?

van Driel: All I can say is listen closely to their story. Take off your own prejudiced glasses and keep on seeing them as unique individuals, just like everybody else. Don't see them as a "transgender" per se.

This program told a story unfamiliar to most of us about an easily accepted trans child. Do you have any suggestions for other countries in supporting trans youth?

van Driel: Well, I think it is very important to support trans youth, because they deal with such big personal crises at a young age already! When being transgender isn't a taboo, these children can more easily express themselves. So we should keep on telling the stories of transgender children. Also, after their hormonal treatments, they easily get depressed, so society should have knowledge of this so they can offer support.

I also think it is very important that people know being transgender is not a choice. It is just a mix-up of chromosomes and that's it. So knowledge is the key and knowledge starts in education. In societies where religion or other cultural beliefs are not open to transgenderism, there's a huge need for the academic world, I think. The academic role is to get their knowledge about transgenderism to schools. I do realize that is a long way going for most societies. Recently, I was in Russia where they couldn't show my film. It is just not possible there. There would be reprisals. That makes me very sad, realizing that the struggle will go on for ages.

And we need brave kids like Niels and Sterre in every society to share their story, and we need film-makers to be their vehicle. ■

The interview was conducted by Krysten Stein and Stephanie Talbot.

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