

“Being confident in who you are”

A CONVERSATION WITH LAUNA KENNETT*
ON *MY LIFE – BORN TO VLOG*

My Life – Born to Vlog

13-year-old Nikki Lilly is busy – and it all happened by chance. Her rare medical condition, which gives her heavy nosebleeds and headaches, has led to Nikki missing loads of school. So to keep herself busy she decided – with her parents on board – to start a vlog.

Now, some years later, she is an international hit with a global following. Her ‘getting ready for prom’ vlog has had over 1,500,000 views. The CBBC cameras follow her across the summer as she travels to Denver, Colorado for groundbreaking surgery, keeps up her vlog and becomes a contestant and eventual winner of *Junior Bake Off*.¹

What is the idea behind My Life – Born to Vlog?

Kennett: Sarah Murch, Executive Producer and Managing Director of Blakeway North, introduced me to Nikki, a 13-year-old vlogger suffering from AVM (Ill. 1).² We wanted to tell her story in a “My Life” documentary. So I filmed her over quite a long period of time, which is how I like to make documentaries – rather than just having 8 days or something. So I followed her over 6 months, and for me it was really important to facilitate her telling her own story. It was the first time I had ever worked in kids’ TV so I thought: “Well, she is 13 and she knows her mind.” She has also had a lot of experience putting her YouTube channel together and telling her story

through that. So I thought it was really important to listen to her. So by talking about it we tried to find out what was important – the important parts of her stories for her to tell.

What was important to you in the production process?

Kennett: What was really important to me, on every level of the production process, was that I talked to Nikki: from deciding what we were going to film to her doing her own voiceover, because she narrated it, or choosing the music. We got her into the edit. It was really important for me that she felt a sense of ownership of the documentary and that she felt it completely represented her life during that period. That was completely crucial to me.

What does she want to tell the audience? What is important for her?

Kennett: I think her main message is about being the best person that you could be, however trying your situation. So she is incredibly resilient, and it is so proven to everybody that even if things aren’t straightforward, you can still have a great life. I think that is her main story. And she just wants to talk about everything, so her being sick is just a tiny part of the rest of her life. Sometimes she just wants to talk about cakes, make-up, or all those different things that make her who she is.

Nikki looks different from other children. What were your concerns when making the documentary? Were there any things that you hesitated to do or film?

Kennett: The first time that you meet her you are aware of the fact that you are meeting somebody with a kind of facial difference. But you really quickly get over that and Nikki is just Nikki.



Ill. 1: Nikki is a 13-year-old vlogger suffering from AVM



Screenshot from My Life – Born to Vlog © CBBC

Ill. 2: Nikki asks Prime Minister Theresa May about her life as a teenager

I don't think I ever hesitated to do anything. Probably the only sequence [about her facial malformation] that we produced in the whole programme was when she went to meet the other Nikki, who has also got a facial AVM. They have a discussion, and the discussion was all kind of natural: they had wanted to meet for ages, they had been friends, but they had never met in person. They had a frank conversation about when people stare at them in public, especially adults, and the fact that they would much prefer if people would come up to them and say: "What is wrong with your face?" rather than just giving them strange looks constantly. I think it was important to challenge that at some point and say: "Ok, this is how I feel when people stare at me." But apart from that, I just see Nikki and I just filmed her thing really.

What impressed you most when you met and followed Nikki?

Kennett: I think the bits that I loved were when she did her video diaries. There is one especially, when she is under the sheets in her bed, and she has had a really bad day and is talking to her camera. She chose to do that. I had told her that if she ever wanted to record anything by herself that would be great. So she had decided to film herself on a bad day being very honest to the camera and then giving it to me to use. These moments impressed me, because most of the time on YouTube and these

channels she was really upbeat and positive. That is her message, which is amazing. But when she let us in to the hard times, I was really impressed by her honesty and her showing how tough it was, and is.

In the documentary, you have touched a very sensitive issue: hate speech and shit storms. Why did you do that?

Kennett: I think it is so common now for kids to put themselves out there on social media and it seems that everyone gets negative comments and hate speech. Nikki has had horrible things said to her: people have told her to kill herself and just horrific things. I think it is really important to know that everybody has kind of experienced negative feedback. And it is crucial in those situations to try not to take it personally, talk to other people about it and try to move on and not get sucked into it. And Nikki is really good at that. She has worked a lot and done many projects in the last 6 months, amongst others with Prince William, to combat cyberbullying and things like that. She is very good at it and she is passionate talking about all that stuff.

Nikki is amazing. Why is she so resilient?

Kennett: Yes, she is completely amazing. At the moment we are making a new series of interviews with her called "Nikki Lilly meets...". A couple of weeks ago, she interviewed the Prime Minister Theresa May (Ill. 2), a couple of days ago, she interviewed Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party. She is asking them about how it was for them as teenagers. So, she walks into #10 Downing Street with an insane amount of confidence. Her illness has probably

made her mature a lot quicker. Her parents are both amazing people – really positive and encouraging – and she has a great brother and sister who are older. Some people are just born being brilliant and I think Nikki has just sort of got it. Equally, she will sometimes get nervous like everybody else and she will talk to me about it if we are about to interview someone. But once the camera starts rolling she is brilliant, yes, she comes alive mostly on camera.

What can we all learn from Nikki?

Kennett: I guess just the whole: being confident in who you are, not letting people get you down and if you want something, just go and get it. That is what she does. We still have to be careful because of the audience. We went to Denver, and we showed her surgery, but clearly we didn't see any of the surgery itself. Prior to surgery, Nikki has a really awful time. So [the shooting] is about a week after surgery, when she is in intensive care on a huge amount of drugs and pain relief. I think we had to be careful. If it was a documentary for adults, you would have seen more of that. But still, you touch on how hard it is. In fact she is a lot more amazing than I could ever portray. ■

NOTES

¹ A British TV baking competition series broadcast on CBBC.

² Arteriovenous malformation (AVM)

* Launa Kennett is producer director of the series My Life – Born to Vlog (CBBC, UK).

