

My Identity & For A Better Life

EXPLORATION OF CARE THROUGH FILM

By **Anthony Turner**

Foster Focus Contributor

As a former foster youth I've read, watched, and listened to many young adults both currently in the foster care system and out of it. They've all been emotional stories that had a mix of strength, perseverance, fear, and uncertainty, among other things. The documentary short films, *My Identity* and *For A Better Life* by director Yasmin Mistry, are no exception.

My Identity is the story of Ashley, a young woman growing up in the Chicago child welfare system. When Ashley talks about how she was separated from her family without being able to do anything about it, and growing up in kinship care with her Aunt, I found myself nodding my head. I imagine many foster youth, if not all, know the feeling of leaving their family, whether intentionally or unintentionally. It's uncomfortable, it's scary, it might be relieving, but there's that sense of uncertainty about what's next.

What stood out to me in Ashley's story was the number of social workers that came in and out of her life. Can you imagine having a great deal of distrust and emotional trauma and then finally getting introduced to a social worker who you feel open and honest with, after some time, only for them to leave and start the process again? Not that fun. It leaves you feeling jaded and vulnerable when you've established a relationship with one case manager only to have to do it all again, fearing that they too will leave.

I like how Ashley shares her story to empower others and turn her negative experience into a positive one. It requires lots of transparency, vulnerability, and passion to share personal things that have traumatized you only to come to the other side and say that you have overcome it. I believe many foster youth who are feeling helpless, or feel like they have no control in their life, can see from Ashley's story that your circumstances don't make you who you are. There is a silver lining, you will still experience some hardships and will feel lost at times, but life does get better.

We also see this same vulnerability and ability to overcome in *For A Better Life*, the story of a young man named Fekri who is sold out of Tunisia and winds up in the NYC foster care system after years of abuse. Fekri's story is just as relatable to me, if not even more so, particularly his being excessively physically abused and not feeling supported in his living situation. As a survivor of child abuse I know how it feels when you live in fear of your legal guardian. The same person who is supposed to be helping you, is instead beating you and not showing you any love or compassion.

It's a very traumatizing experience that I still haven't come to grips with. When talking with other young adults they confided that they had similar experiences, and while at times it was triggering, it felt good to share it with other peers who have similar backgrounds.

Among some of the trauma that was shared in "For A Better Life"

another thing that I immediately resonated with is having suicidal ideations', wishing to end my life. Disturbingly I find this is quite common among young boys in the 10-14 age bracket who have faced severe trauma. Personally, I did not truly want to die, I just wanted to find an escape to all the pain and frustration I felt not having power in my own life. I constantly questioned why things had to happen to me, I believe many young adults in the foster care system want a trusting adult that they can confide in, have a support system when things are rough despite what they may say.

Just like Fekri, Brunswick Hall was the same hospital I entered as a young teen and it was a terrible experience. Seeing kids act up, feeling frustrated, worrying about my own safety from aggressive peers, and hating the feeling of having to take medication because of my "mood swings." I also share his sentiment of "It hurt emotionally when I saw them get restrained." Oftentimes I would see kids get put down in holds for throwing chairs or using profanity; and while their actions were not right, I felt their frustration of being institutionalized and not having any say in their life or not seeing their family.

After watching these two films which showcase these strong individuals I can't help but feel that while these are the stories of former foster youth that survived the "system" many of the things they went through are so common among millions of others. It's for that reason I believe many other youth currently in the system, or even those who have transitioned out, should watch these films. Being able to get out of the foster care system in one piece is tough as is, but having the resources, support system, housing, and income in place by the time you age out is even harder.

My Identity and *For A Better Life* are part of a documentary short film series, which gives current and former foster youth an opportunity to be heard. Other films in the series include *Feeling Wanted* and *Family Rewritten*. In this series foster youth share their stories on camera and also work behind the scenes as musicians, writers, camera operators, producers and more.

The films are available for educational licensing at fostercarefilm.vhx.tv. All community screening kits come with study guides, bonus materials and a public screening license.

Organizations interested in hosting a filmmaker or film subject Q&A may fill out this form to request more information.

Foster youth interested in participating behind the scenes can contact info@fostercarefilm.com for more information.

To learn more about the Foster Care Film & Community Engagement Project visit fostercarefilm.com