



Film

Structure, validation, and choices: Foster Care Films series

Yasmin Mistry founded the Foster Care Film & Community Engagement Project (FCFCEP) in 2012. During her volunteer work as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, dedicated to getting services for foster care children with special needs, Mistry explains on her website that she “realised the voices of the children she worked with were not being heard and their stories never told”. So she began the film series, Foster Care Films, which not only “gives current and former foster youth a chance to tell their own stories,” but also “are created with the help of foster youth, foster families, and social workers”. Animations in the films allow youth a way to tell their story when they may have little or no documentation of their past, and also provide anonymity for the speaker when they prefer to create some distance from their story. A blend of interview, narration, and animation in the films creates a powerful storytelling genre.

In *Feeling Wanted*, Charell recalls how her loving great-grandmother, the main caregiver for herself and her sister, fell ill. With a father in prison and a mother suffering from drug addiction, 6-year-old Charell saw her personal items put into a garbage bag as she and her sister were whisked off to foster care, where they encountered physical abuse. Charell finally found a sense of independence when she chose to attend boarding school at age 14, and had the chance to rebuild her relationship with her rehabilitated mother. She found the relative independence of boarding school suited her very well: “School was always the place where I felt safe.”

It’s preferable to place children in kinship care if possible—with relatives who can look after them. In *My Identity*, Ashley explains how her family suffered abuse by a man who encouraged her mother’s drug addiction until her mother died from an overdose. Once the man was imprisoned for drug dealing, Ashley was able to live with her cousins under the foster care system, while her half-brother was sent to live with his grandparents. She was too young to understand that they would be separated for life, and Ashley laments



My Identity; illustration by Alicia Chen

the divide that deepened as they grew up; he served in the military, fighting wars in Afghanistan, while she was drawn to convert to Islam due to its structure and strictures on drugs and alcohol. In her faith, she’s found community, and she says, “I felt a need for spirituality, and structure, because I never had control of anything in my life.”

In *Family Rewritten*, Camilla doesn’t blame her parents for their difficulties, but chooses to make empowering decisions for her own health and wellbeing. Her father struggled with alcoholism, and when her mother lost her job, the family couldn’t keep the home running. This was especially frightening for Camilla, who, with cystic fibrosis, takes physical therapy in the form of an electronically inflated vest, which shakes up phlegm accumulating in her lungs; when the electricity was cut off, Camilla couldn’t use the vest. She also wasn’t eating because there was no food in the house. But she found support with her best friend’s family: aged 17, Camilla could choose to go into a foster care arrangement with them. “Foster care [has] helped me so much; they [the social workers] validated so much for me.” She says her foster mum helps her arrange everything, from dentist appointments to prom. “That’s what I’ve been craving at home... [it’s a] rebuilding of my life.”

In *For A Better Life*, Fekri, born in Tunisia, works to find some forgiveness towards his mother, who sold him at the age of 5 for US\$100 to a French tourist. Though he understands that his mother hoped he would have a better life—since his father was abusive, and he had to resort to stealing food to eat—the woman who bought Fekri was sexually and physically abusive to him for years. When Fekri was 9 years old, she beat him nearly to death, and he was hospitalised for a year and a half. She was imprisoned. Fekri’s anger led him to struggle in different foster homes, but he found solace and support at Little Flower Residential Treatment Centre, a therapeutic community “guided by the understanding that [their] young people have experienced multiple traumas that strongly influence their behaviours”. “That was basically the turning point,” Fekri explains. He stayed for 9 years. “I’m thankful to go through that system—it saved my life.”

Despite extremely difficult circumstances, each narrator in Foster Care Films explains how they navigated the system and eventually found support, hope, and different versions of family. Sometimes this outcome was thanks to the system, as for Fekri and Camilla, and sometimes despite it, as for Charell and Ashley. “Usually they don’t prepare you [to move to another home]”, Charell says. “It’s not an easy move if the choice is never yours.”

Kelley Swain

Lancet Child Adolesc Health 2022

Published Online

June 23, 2022

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(22\)00195-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(22)00195-X)

Foster Care Films

Directed by Yasmin Mistry
Foster Care Film & Community Engagement Project, 2022
10 min each

For the FCFCEP website see
<http://fostercarefilm.com>

For the Little Flower Residential Treatment Centre see
<https://www.littleflower.org/programs-and-services/rtc/>