

Film Chronicles Boy's Struggle With Autism

Touching portrait of a youth living with a learning disorder will be made available to B.C. school districts

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Published: Thursday, February 01, 2007

The pre-teen boy bounced bravely up to the microphone at the front of the packed Spectrum Community School theatre.

He had a question for the star of the evening. "How hard was Grade 4 for you?" the boy asked, staring at the figure on the stage.

Fourteen-year-old Adam, dressed in a white Giants baseball jersey and matching cap, smiled at the question. "You're not going to like hearing this one bit," he told the younger boy. "Grade 4 was a pretty hard year for me."

So, in fact, were Grades 5, 6 and 7 for Adam, a Vancouver teen with Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism spectrum disorder that impairs the ability to understand body language and facial expressions and creates difficulty interacting with others.

It's that Grade 7 year -- and the struggles of Adam, his filmmaker mother Marianne and their family -- that comprise the compelling story of *The Boy Inside*.

The documentary shows Adam trying desperately to make friends but being rejected by kids who think he's weird. It also depicts how his parents deal constantly with their son's troubles at school, which range from getting bullied himself to being physical with others.

The film was screened for an appreciative audience this week at Spectrum. Soon it will be available in every B.C. school district as part of a provincial government initiative to promote awareness and acceptance of children with special needs.

Marianne Kaplan's intimate documentary is honest enough to be painful at times as Adam is shunned from pickup basketball games at his unnamed Vancouver elementary school. The film depicts how the family's entire life is nearly consumed by the day-to-day dealings with Adam's disability -- his inability to make friends and his struggle against bullying -- and the worries about whether he will enjoy an independent future.

It's a struggle shared by other families with autistic children and it obviously touched many in an audience that included parents and children. Kaplan is pleased that the film will now also be used to foster acceptance of children like Adam in B.C. schools, an initiative she hopes to spread countrywide.

Three cabinet ministers attended the screening -- Children and Families Minister Tom Christensen, Education Minister Shirley Bond and Minister of State for Child Care Linda Reid. They said B.C. school districts will be provided with study guides to help foster discussion, along with DVDs of the film.

"Marianne has created a work that we believe will make a difference," Bond said as the film was introduced.

The Boy Inside is the fourth film for Kaplan, 48, and easily the most personal. It was first shown on CBC Newsworld in September and will be shown on the same channel April 3 and 7, on The Lens, beginning at 10 p.m.

The documentary sold out its screenings at the Vancouver International Film Festival and will be part of the One World festival this March in Prague. After a screening in Toronto at the end of that month, Kaplan will work on its U.S. launch.

"I always pick a subject that I get very passionate about and then I make a film to shed light on that, always with the hope that it is going to change minds," said Kaplan, a native of South Africa.

One of those minds belongs to Adam's main tormentor during that tumultuous Grade 7 year. The boy watched the documentary in September and promptly sent Adam a heartfelt e-mail

apologizing for his actions, saying he wished he could have seen things through Adam's eyes earlier.

Adam, who has an engaging sense of humour, told the crowd that he went to the boy's house and presented him with a DVD of *The Boy Inside*. "An autographed copy," he said with a grin.

"I think if it can touch a kid like that, I think it can touch a lot of other kids, too," said his mother.

Now in Grade 9, Adam is enjoying high school in Vancouver, where "I'm having way more good times than bad times."

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