

The Boy Inside the documentary

By Fiona Hughes (for the Vancouver Courier - 09/29/2006)

Local filmmaker Marianne Kaplan beams with delight when she tells me the first screening of her documentary *The Boy Inside* on Saturday at the Vancouver International Film Festival is sold out.

A couple of days later, she emails to let me know the second screening on Oct. 10 is also sold out and that a third screening has just been added to the schedule on Oct.5. (A shorter version airs on CBC Newsworld Oct. 24.)

Kaplan's film has clearly touched a nerve.

An intensely personal look at her own family, *The Boy Inside* is the story of her son Adam, a highly intelligent and startlingly articulate 12-year-old diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. It's a form of autism that makes social interaction and normal conversation tremendously challenging. For his entire elementary school experience, Adam was virtually friendless.

While Adam understands and can explain the intellectual and cognitive steps required to make and keep friends, he doesn't know how to do it. There is a disconnect between the cognitive and emotional wiring in his brain.

His classmates bluntly dismiss him because of his bizarre and sometimes rough behaviour and rudeness. Their outright rejection, name calling ("retard") and occasional bullying leave Adam feeling lonely and despondent most of the time. It's a sad existence.

In one scene, Kaplan films Adam in his schoolyard trying to get in on a game of basketball. The other boys say no. It's a crushing scene, one Adam-and Kaplan-have replayed almost his entire life.

Kaplan thinks she knows why people are so interested in the story. "More and more kids are being diagnosed with autism

spectrum disorders, which include Asperger's syndrome, these days-the statistics are one in 160," Kaplan says, also noting that Asperger's is diagnosed more in males than females by a ratio of six to one. "Everyone is touched in some way-either someone in your family, or a child of friends or even someone in your classroom or workplace."

Kaplan says people on the autistic spectrum think differently than "neurotypicals" do. (Neurotypical is the word used by people with autism to describe so-called normal types.)

"I think there is some fascination with the idea of people experiencing the same world we do, but processing the information in a totally different way," she writes in her email.

She also attributes interest in the subject to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, the bestselling novel by English author Mark Haddon that tells the story of a young boy with Asperger's syndrome from the boy's point of view.

"Once I mention what my film is about, everyone mentions that book," she says. "I'm amazed at how many people read that book and are now aware of autism and Asperger's."

Kaplan, whose previous documentaries include *Deconstructing Supper*, about genetically modified food, featuring local chef John Bishop, and *Songololo: Voices of Change*, which was filmed during the dying days of Apartheid in Kaplan's native South Africa, chose to turn the camera on herself and her family for two reasons.

"I wanted to make a personal film that would have value in it not just for us but also for other people," she says. "I also want to show what it's like to raise a kid with a disability and to show the immense pressure on families_ It's not something that's talked about a lot, though it's being diagnosed more and more. In the past, people with Asperger's were considered eccentric, rude and unemployable but never given an official label. It's called a hidden disability because a lot of the time these people seem absolutely just like you and me. They are very verbal and very

bright, but it's in the area of social interaction and communication where they fall down."

The 47-minute film follows Adam over the course of his final year in elementary school, which Kaplan says was "hellish." Good for filmmaking, bad for the family. When Kaplan realizes she can't change Adam, she attempts to change the people around him by paying for an Asperger's behavioural expert to visit Adam's class. The visit makes a surprising difference. The expert explained Adam's behaviour to the children and gave it a name. She also gave them strategies on how to deal with Adam, which had the biggest impact. Adam's classmates were suddenly more accepting of him.

Now 14, Adam is at a mini-school at a Vancouver public high school, which Kaplan didn't want to name, where life is a tad easier.

"Socially, it's still hard for him because of his Asperger's. He really annoys a lot of people," says a vivacious Kaplan. "But he does have a group of friends who like him and accept him-the 'nerdy' kids, though Adam is desperate to be accepted by the cool kids."

Kaplan thinks Adam's acceptance by the "nerds" is probably due to their own experiences with rejection.

"These friends of Adam have created a group where they feel safe together and they're inviting him into the group because they have more empathy for him because they've probably been ostracized," she says. "Adam is also really bright and that's impressive to them."

Though it appears that Kaplan keeps it together in the film, she has regular meltdowns. During the filming, she reached a crisis point and had to put Adam into foster care for a weekend. It was the first time she, her husband and daughter Sarah had a break from Adam.

"We were just a normal family of three for a weekend that had

no stress. It's OK to take a break, though we were guilt-ridden about it initially. But I think the value of that weekend is that it wasn't for Adam-it was for us."

Adam is now only four years away from celebrating his 18th birthday and becoming an adult. Though Adam's social life has improved since entering high school, Kaplan and her family continue to deal with stressful, sometimes volatile situations. There will always be something to worry about with Adam and Kaplan knows that, which is why she never sugarcoated her experiences with Adam in the film.

"My greatest fear is the fear every parent has whether their kid is special needs or not- that in spite of everything that we're doing to guide him and help him and support him, is that he'll still make bad choices and be somewhere where we can't help him," she says. For more information, visit viff.org or theboyinside.com.

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