Spotlight Articles

Creating Foster Care Film with Yasmin Mistry

By Kim Phagan-Hansel

When Yasmin Mistry moved to New York City for graduate school about 10 years ago, she started searching for ways to volunteer and get involved in the local community. Involved in volunteer work throughout college, she really wanted to find a meaningful way to help others.

"I was looking for something on a bigger scale and I happened upon CASA," Mistry said.

After completing the training, Mistry became a CASA, or court appointed special advocate, a position she's served in for almost eight years now. Through the years, she's had several long-term cases and has gained a greater understanding of the complexity of foster care. As an advocate for the children, Mistry said she was surprised how little voice the children had in their own lives. She saw many times that caseworkers, judges, therapists, foster parents and others had more say about what happened to the children than the children did themselves.

"It didn't feel like the kids had any say in their lives," Mistry said. "I thought they weren't having a voice."

A professional designer and animator, Mistry knew there had to be a way she could match her professional expertise with her passion for helping children. Though she served as a CASA, she wanted to do more. A few years ago she set out to find a way to share the stories of children in the foster care system and ultimately, Foster Care Film and Community Engagement Project was born.

Initially, Mistry interviewed a number of foster youth with the idea of creating one full-length film about the foster care experience. But as she started interviewing the youth, she realized their stories were much more in-depth and each worthy of a standalone piece.

"We were actually intending to interview a bunch of people and put it all into one film," Mistry said. "But some of the interviews lasted close to nine hours and they were pretty

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intense and in-depth."

So, Mistry decided to change direction and create several shorter length films, the first, titled "Feeling Wanted" was released in February 2015. "Feeling Wanted" is the story of Charell, who entered foster care at age 6. Since being released, the film has won a number of short film awards, including winning best documentary at CTLPDX in 2015, and best cinematography by the St. Louis Filmmakers Showcase, as well as audience choice by IndieWorks.

The decision to lead with Charell's story was difficult, but Mistry felt compelled to share the child's story. And since the release of "Feeling Wanted," Charell has also started speaking more about her journey through foster care and what she's learned along the way.

"She's really inspiring," Mistry said. "We thought it would be a good film to start with. We want to have an impact on foster youth and inspire them."

In February, the second film in the series was released, "My Identity." This film follows Ashley through foster care and into adulthood. It highlights the struggles and heartaches Ashley experienced along the way. That film is now making its way through various film festivals. "My Identity" is something Mistry said she sees as starkly different from the first film, providing a completely different view of the foster care experience, something Mistry is trying to achieve with every film.

"We want to get very diverse backgrounds," Mistry said. "We want this to span all demographics. We're trying to reach a lot of audiences."

This spring Mistry plans to begin work on the next short film. Ultimately, Mistry hopes to create six to eight short films and then work on a much larger film over time as funding for the project becomes available.

"We want to encourage people to take action," Mistry said. "With all the films we're trying to target foster youth themselves to inspire them."

Ultimately, Mistry said she hopes the films inspire others to make a difference in the lives of children in foster care. She also hopes that the stories inspire foster youth as well.

All of the stories and work on the films has primarily been done through volunteers who are committed to helping share the stories of youth in foster care through film. Some of those involved included former foster youth as well, and for them, the work is very personal, Mistry said.

"In the end people are really attached to the project," Mistry said. "Many of the volunteers have personal relationships with foster care."

For more information on Foster Care Film and Community Engagement Project and how you can get involved in the organization's various projects, visit http://fostercarefilm.com.

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