

Telling a transgender story

A CONVERSATION WITH JULIE KALCEFF* ON *FIRST DAY*

First Day

First Day tells a story about the fears associated with the transition between primary school and high school – but in Hannah’s case, the stakes are even higher: she will be attending school for the first time as a girl (Ill. 1-3).

How did you come up with the idea for *First Day*?

Kalceff: ABC, the national broadcaster in Australia, was running an initiative celebrating “The International Day of the Girl”. They put a call out for submissions for TV episodes that were targeted at girls as stand-alone shows with a duration of 20 minutes. At the same time, my niece was transitioning from male to female and there was nothing on TV that could support her. I had never done children’s television before but thought it would be great if there was a TV show for children featuring a transgender girl so we can see that these kids are going through everyday experiences like all kids. I contacted producer Kirsty Stark and sent her an outline of the episode. Kirsty was really excited by it and extremely supportive. We submitted the application to the ABC and they chose it as one of the episodes to go into production.

How did you find the lead actress?

Kalceff: Our lead actress Evie Macdonald is transgender. When the ABC suggested casting a transgender girl in the lead role, my producer Kirsty Stark and I were in complete agreement because we believed this was a transgender person’s

story to tell. We put a casting call out – one post on Facebook. It was shared over 350 times throughout the LGBTQI community and beyond. We had a great deal of support. We had 12 girls apply for the role and I skyped with each of them. A couple of them were a bit too old for the role and one or two weren’t entirely out within their community. We talked to them about the reality of being on TV and what the response might be as a result and a few of the girls withdrew. We had 5 girls do a self-tape. Evie’s audition tape was very strong and she was great in front of the camera. Evie and her family had been on a news program here in Australia talking about her transition. She was already out, which was good as we were very mindful of the exposure and attention the lead actress would receive. Evie’s mother runs a support group for parents of transgender children. She is a wonderful advocate and a great support to a lot of people. They were really in a perfect position to deal with this.

Was it Evie’s first time in front of the camera?

Kalceff: Yes. Evie had never acted before but was incredible in front of the camera. We were a little concerned because it’s a big role for a 12-year-old, and especially for someone who hasn’t acted before. It was a 5-day shoot and Evie is in every scene so there was a lot of responsibility weighing on her shoulders. Not only was she incredible, but she loved every minute of it and we couldn’t be happier with the results.

When the film was released there was quite a lot of press. How did Evie deal with it?

Kalceff: Evie handled it extremely well. Her mum monitored the response on social media and shielded Evie from anything that was negative. There wasn’t a lot that was negative, but obviously there were some people who disagreed with the subject matter. The ABC is also very good at protecting



Ill. 1: Hannah’s last day as Thomas at her old school



Screenshot from First Day © ABC

Ill. 2: Hannah feels comfortable at her new school



Screenshot from First Day © ABC

Ill. 3: "Thomas?" – A girl from Hannah's former school happens to meet her by the toilets

child actors. After the shoot, Evie went back to normal life. She has 4 siblings and after being in Sydney shooting for 5 days, she flew back home, went back to school, and got back to being a 12-year-old girl. She is just a normal kid who has done this amazing thing.

What do you hope children learn from this program?

Kalceff: I hope that, first of all, transgender children who see this show realise they are not alone. If they are struggling or questioning, or if they are in the situation where they don't feel safe, I hope seeing *First Day* and knowing Evie is transgender makes them realise that it is OK and that other people have been

through it, too. And I hope that people who aren't transgender who watch *First Day* realise transgender children are like all other children. We made the show about a child starting secondary school because everyone can relate to that. I think representation is incredibly important. If we see people on screen and if we tell stories about them that others can relate to, it makes us realise, first of all, that transgender people exist, and secondly that they are just like us. We are more alike than we are different.

Is a story about a transgender child a good way to touch on issues like resilience?

Kalceff: From a very young age, transgender children have had to fight for who they are, stand up for themselves and really assert themselves. Often, when they start questioning the gender assigned to them at birth, they don't have the support of their school or are being teased and bullied for it. So I think once they have found the strength to go through that, they know who they are, and they know they need to stand up for themselves. I think once you have been through something like that, you know you can overcome other things that are put in your path.

What did you gain from this experience?

Kalceff: On a personal level it was a really inspiring and humbling experience. I am so incredibly impressed with Evie and her mother and the work they do as advocates for transgender children and parents of transgender children. The more time I spent with Evie and the more she told me about the things she's been through, the more impressed I was with her confidence and resilience. She has been through some incredibly difficult experiences and has emerged as this beautiful, kind, caring person – and she is only 12 years old! Seeing the support her family gives her and the incredible work Evie and her mother are doing, makes me really grateful that there are people like them in the world. It inspires me to want to be a better person, to create content that really helps people and to bring stories into the world that we haven't seen before. ■

**Julie Kalceff is the writer/director of First Day. She is a graduate of the Australian Film, Television and Radio School with a masters degree in scriptwriting and is an award-winning writer, director and producer, Australia.*

