

Documenting a teen's uncertain story

Filmmaker focuses on striving student

By SARAH EARLE
For the Monitor

The title of the film was a big enough question, but there was a second, critical question filling Dan Habib's mind as he filmed *Who Cares About Kelsey?* He didn't know how the film was going to end.

This wasn't a matter of indecision or procrastination. Rather, Habib had chosen to examine the way schools are helping kids with emotional and behavioral disabilities by focusing on one young woman,

a young woman who illustrated, perhaps a little too well, the precarious nature of this population.

"I wasn't sure Kelsey was going to graduate. It actually came down to the last couple of days of school," said Habib, a filmmaker in resi-



Habib

dence for the University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disability and a former photo editor for the *Monitor*. "That was kind of this wonderful tension in the film . . . but it was also scary. But I just had a

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Dan Habib, filmmaker

sense, based on who she was and the team that she had around her, that she was going to make it."

The film, which premieres next month at Red River Theatres, follows Kelsey Carroll through her senior year at Somersworth High School as she struggles to rise above personal challenges, including ADHD and the scars of a troubled past, to attain her diplo-

ma and plan for her future. A world-weary, witty teenager with a knot of dark hair and a penchant for baggy sweat-shirts, she is at once vulnerable and strong, infuriating and endearing. Watching her at home, at work and at school, we see her always on the brink - of success, of failure, of a breakdown, of a breakthrough

See **DOCUMENTARY - A8**

DOCUMENTARY Continued from A1

— and we see how vitally she needs the support system that's recently been erected at her school.

Though Kelsey without a doubt gives the film its heart, that support system is the real subject of the film. *Who Cares About Kelsey?* demonstrates how the concept of caring can be turned into something concrete and deliberate, something as logical as it is life-changing, something within any school's reach.

Habib said he made the film in response to feedback on his first film, *Including Samuel*, an internationally acclaimed documentary that takes an honest, personal look at the concept of inclusion. That film focused largely on his son, Samuel, who has cerebral palsy, and on his family's efforts to create a full life for him.

"Almost everywhere I go, I get the same question, which is, 'What about kids with emotional and behavioral disabilities?'" Habib said. "I started thinking, there's got to be a great story here. I saw a big need in the world of education to support this discussion."

Framework for change

Habib began researching the subject and uncovered some alarming statistics: Among adolescents with mental health needs, 70 percent don't get the help they need. Nationally, only 40 percent of young people with emotional and behavioral disabilities graduate from high school. And these young people are twice as likely as students with other disabilities to end up in a correctional facility.

In response to those realities, Habib learned about schools that were making measurable progress through educational reform. He trained his lens on an educational framework called RENEW (Rehabilitation, Empowerment, Natural Supports, Education and Work) that had brought about drastic change at Somersworth High School, the first high school in the state to put it into practice. In just a few years, the school had reduced its dropout rate, once one of the highest in the state, by a startling 75 percent and decreased its disciplinary issues by 60 percent.

RENEW "is kind of like an

educational framework for the best evidence-based practices in education," Habib said. "The things you see in the film reflect larger educational strategies that are seen at a state and national level as effective."

Adopting the framework was at first a move of desperation more than anything else, said Kathy Francoeur, who was the crisis intervention coordinator at the school at the time and now works as a RENEW trainer and facilitator for the Institute on Disability. "Teachers were really scared and frustrated," she said in an interview last week. "A lot of kids were roaming the halls. There was a lot of swearing, drugs. . . . It was a very scary place."

RENEW, and its parent framework, PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports), are anchored in the idea that positive reinforcement works far better than punitive strategies at changing behavior and that young people should be actively involved in the way their school is run.

For students like Kelsey with intense emotional needs, RENEW constructs a specific and consistent set of supports that includes things like mapping out plans and goals, checking in with teachers regularly and drawing parents into the educational process. RENEW instructs educators in reacting calmly to problem behavior and looking beneath the behavior for the underlying cause. Though it doesn't discard all punitive strategies, it favors calm discourse over knee-jerk punishment.

What all that translated to in Kelsey's life can be summed up in a word: caring.

"I've had a really crappy life. . . . A little bit of caring will take me a long way," Kelsey says in the film. "RENEW helped me clean all the crap out of my life. . . . I guess I started caring about myself."

Complicated context

Kelsey was a sophomore when the school began implementing PBIS and RENEW, and her future looked less than promising. She had failed all her classes the year before and had been suspended for dealing drugs. In public she was



ALEXANDER COHN / Monitor staff

Kelsey Carroll watches the film at a screening.

regularly volatile and disruptive, and in private she had repeatedly cut herself.

Habib met Kelsey in the fall of her senior year, when she'd begun to turn her life around but still had a long way to go to reach her goals. He at first planned to make her just one part of the film but eventually decided to focus solely on her story.

Habib was struck by how profoundly Kelsey had changed, but also by how nuanced those changes were and how complicated their context.

"One of the reasons I chose her as a subject is the issues she's dealing with in her life are not easily resolved," said Habib, who is now helping to implement PBIS at Rundlett Middle School, where his son Samuel is in sixth grade.

Habib also prized Kelsey's openness and authenticity around the camera — as well as her razor-sharp wit. "I think humor is such a great entry point," he said.

At a screening for educators this month, Kelsey's wisecracks repeatedly elicited laughter from the audience. At one point, after finding out she's getting an F in math, Kelsey goes into a tirade about her math teacher's teaching style: "I don't want to know how friggin' the Mayans used math. I just want to know what two plus two is," she says.

At another point, Kelsey tries to hold onto her dream of becoming a police officer in the face of her father's skepticism. "I want to prove my father

wrong . . . at the end be this cop and pull him over and go, 'Ha.'"

If she is entertaining, Kelsey is not always likeable, and her transformation, even by film's end, is far from complete. One of the challenges for Habib was painting an even-handed portrait of her and her family and illustrating her progress in an accurate way.

"If you're going to do a film about kids who have emotional and behavioral disabilities, you have to show those disabilities," Habib said. "I felt like it was important from the beginning of the film to show that Kelsey was really kind of a difficult kid."

Like the educators who are working with her, Habib worked hard to dig beneath Kelsey's problematic behavior and help audiences really understand her. He shows her interacting with her father, a military man who makes little effort to sympathize with her needs, and her mother, who struggles with substance abuse and destructive behaviors. Partway through the film, Kelsey reveals a family secret that explains much of her anger. The scene is a turning point in audience reactions to Kelsey, said Habib, who has screened the film or portions of it to several audiences.

As we get to know Kelsey, we also get a close-up look at her support system and how it has changed her life. We see Francoeur showing up at Kelsey's house after she and her boyfriend break up. We watch how a school administrator defuses a high-tension

SEE THE FILM

Upcoming local screenings of *Who Cares About Kelsey?* include:

- May 20-26, Red River Theatres, Concord, 7 p.m. Tickets are available through redrivertheatres.org. Some of the screenings at Red River will feature discussions with filmmaker Dan Habib and others. Kelsey Carroll, the film's subject, will participate with Habib in a Q&A at the premiere May 20.
- May 21, Pembroke Academy, 6:30 p.m. Free and open to the public.
- May 22-23, Concord High School (student/staff assemblies sponsored by the Concord Rotary; members of the public may inquire at the school about attending).

For information about these screenings or others, go to whocaresaboutkelsey.com.

confrontation over Kelsey's cell phone by dealing with her calmly, respectfully and in private. And we see the day-in, day-out efforts to keep Kelsey focused on her schoolwork and connected with her goals.

What we don't see is any glimpse of Habib. For this project, Habib opted for a verite style of filmmaking, an unobtrusive, life-as-it-happens approach that's absent the talking heads familiar to many documentaries. "The thing that I've always tried to do, as a journalist and now as a filmmaker, is to get inside people's lives," Habib said. "I thought it would be most effective if I just let life play out."

Caring is key

Habib, who secured funding mostly from New Hampshire sources including the Endowment for Health, the New Hampshire Department of Education and the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, worked with well-known film editors Rose Rosenblatt and Diego Siragna to achieve the verite feel he envisioned for the film.

Focusing so sharply on Kelsey, though effective, left Habib with mountains of unused material. He decided early in the project to make several mini films, which will be screened at various locations and packaged on a DVD for educators, to complement the main film. One focuses on a

9-year-old girl with autism who is thriving at school thanks to several cutting-edge educational practices. Another deals with the disparities between the treatment of Caucasian and African-American youth at a school in Illinois. A third features interviews with incarcerated youth at a juvenile correctional facility.

What those interviews – along with input from several screenings at correctional facilities – confirm is that caring is key to changing the trajectory of a young person's life. "I've interviewed a lot of incarcerated young people, and that's the constant theme," Habib said. "They say they didn't have one person in their lives who really cared about them."

The film will have its theatrical premiere at Red River Theatres from May 20-26, followed by screenings at Pembroke Academy and Concord High School. Habib hopes it will ultimately have a similar impact as *Including Samuel*, which has been screened all over the world, played at numerous film festivals and was featured on *Good Morning America* and NPR's *All Things Considered*.

"Statistics are important and research is important," Habib said at a recent screening. "But human stories are sometimes what it takes to create heart and mind change."