

## ‘Who Cares About Kelsey?’

A documentary by Dan Habib (creator of *Including Samuel*)  
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When Kelsey Carroll first entered Somersworth High School in New Hampshire, she was a more likely candidate for the juvenile justice system than graduation. Diagnosed with ADHD and carrying the emotional scars of homelessness and substance abuse, as well as the actual scars of repeated self-mutilation, Kelsey was volatile, disruptive and, by her own admission, “not a nice person” to be around. As a freshman at Somersworth (NH) High School, she didn’t earn a single academic credit, but she did get suspended for dealing drugs.

Dan Habib’s new documentary film *Who Cares About Kelsey?* follows Kelsey through the ups and downs of her senior year. As the film delves into Kelsey’s life, we watch her navigate the halls and classrooms of her school and the fraught terrain of family and romantic relationships.

Kelsey could have been the poster child for Somersworth High School, which had one of the highest dropout rates in the state in 2006. Like many schools facing funding cuts and pressure to maintain a safe and orderly environment, Somersworth dealt with problem behaviors in a state of crisis, using “zero-tolerance” approaches such as suspension and expulsion, further isolating students like Kelsey and driving many of them to drop out of school or be handled by law enforcement. Morale was low amongst teachers and students alike, and students frequently lashed out at teachers who had lost the will to address the disrespectful and unproductive climate.

In this troubled environment, and with her challenges, Kelsey’s fate seemed decided.

During Kelsey’s freshman year, new leadership at Somersworth High School implemented reforms to reduce the dropout rate as well as improve the school’s culture and climate. This school-wide overhaul – a framework called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports – meant a chance at a different path for Kelsey.

As part of PBIS, the school introduced a student-directed life planning process called RENEW that is positive rather than punitive. During the process of RENEW (Rehabilitation for Empowerment, Natural supports, Education, and Work), Kelsey works with the school's Crisis Intervention Coordinator, Kathy Francoeur, to assemble a team of trusted adults that meets with her weekly. She tells them her dreams, her fears, her likes and dislikes as they furiously record everything on poster paper taped to the walls.

Instead of hiding the scars from cutting herself, Kelsey shows off a new tattoo. When Francoeur comments on the beautiful shading, she could well be talking about the new Kelsey—a young woman who is still at risk but is facing her life with new self-awareness, hope, and control.

Kelsey starts to contemplate a future that she now hopes will include graduation, a career in law enforcement, marriage, a house in New Hampshire, and “one big dog and one small dog.”

As the film delves into Kelsey's life, we watch her interact with a military father who, while affectionate toward Kelsey, questions her account of the past and dismisses her plans for the future. Simultaneously, Kelsey manages her relationship with a mother trying to atone for past failures that set in motion some of Kelsey's most destructive behaviors. Kelsey spends much of her time with a boyfriend she cherishes but whose loyalty and support for Kelsey's newly forming independence are uncertain.

While interacting with the individuals around her, we can see how easily Kelsey could fall into what she describes as “family patterns”—early parenthood, aborted education, substance abuse, limited life options. It is the team of educators at Somersworth who give Kelsey the chance to define a role for herself. *Who Cares About Kelsey?* is about what she does with that chance.

Can emotionally disabled kids overcome their circumstances to succeed? What would American education look like if there was a helping hand for all “problem kids”? These are questions posed by the film. But *Who Cares*

*About Kelsey?* is, first and foremost, Kelsey's story, a story of trying to be seen for her potential rather than the spectacle of her past behavior... and trying to get to a future that, a few years ago, she might never have allowed herself to imagine.