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Color Me Beautiful

Red Without Blue and the Shifting Boundaries of Personal Documentary

by Jesse Hawthorne Ficks

It's a sight to behold: vintage Super-8 footage of two tow-headed tykes performing an exuberant rope-skipping routine with an easy synchronicity that comes naturally only to twins. “We were just in love with each other from the day we were born,” Mark Farley says of his twin brother. “Being Alex’s twin, it was just magical.” Today, Mark no longer has a brother, but rather a sister named Clair. *Red Without Blue*, the astonishing 77-minute documentary that in January bagged the audience award at the Slamdance Film Festival, tells the story of how one became the other. Completed in late 2006 on a shoestring budget by co-directors Brooke Sebold, Benita Sills, and Todd Sills, the film brings a new immediacy to the personal documentary genre with its intimate portrayal of identical twin brothers from the Big Sky country of Montana who had a tougher than average time growing up. So tough, in fact, that they barely survived it.

Perhaps the most wrenching sequence in the film looks back on the night when, at the age of 14, Mark had decided that he and Alex would commit suicide. Both boys had recently come out as gay and, reeling from the traumatizing attentions of a sexual predator, were spiraling downward in a tangle of depression and drug abuse. They drove the family car to a secluded spot, attached hoses leading from the exhaust pipe to the interior, and waited. Fortunately, two hours later they were still alive, and Alex begged Mark to take him home. When their parents discovered what they had done and on the advice of a psychologist, they were sent to different boarding schools, and did not see each other for two-and-a-half years.

Explore, not exploit

When the twins were at last reunited, Alex had some stunning news: he had decided to transition from male to female—from Alex to Clair. In contemplating this transformation, the filmmakers give friends and family members the opportunity to question Clair’s decision.

Above: Mark and Clair Farley began life as identical twin brothers Mark and Alex. In the intimate documentary *Red Without Blue*, one sibling’s change of gender sparks the healing transformation of an entire family.

Many of the stories told are painful ones, but Mark, Clair, and their parents were genuinely sincere and always willing to divulge intimate, if sometimes harrowing, experiences on camera. “There was a complete absence of vanity on their part,” says co-director Brooke Sebold of the Farley family. “They took the three of us in as extended family over the two-and-a-half years that it took to finish the film, welcoming us into their house time and time again, even giving us Christmas presents.” It’s evident that *they* wanted the film to be made, and understood their stake in its outcome.

Ultimately, *Red Without Blue* tells the story of a family falling apart and putting itself back together again. As the filming progressed, the relationships evolved. “Our mistakes were in the past,” Clair says. “Reliving that tension really pushed our family apart for some time. With everyone’s different perspective of memories, we really ran into some problems. But the process of the movie gave each of us a voice. Especially for my mother and I. It helped me understand things, like how my decision had actually taken a son away from my mom.”

And Mark was losing a brother. “Mark and Clair isn’t the same as Mark and Alex,” he reminds his sister at one point. “It was a shock to me,” he says later in an interview with the filmmakers. “I never even knew who transgender people were or what that term meant.” As the film tracks Mark’s new life as an art student in San Francisco, and follows Clair back to New York as she begins preparing for her operation, it keeps the focus on this unique and unconventional relationship between Mark and Clair as they mature into adulthood. Along the way, *Red Without Blue* takes numerous twists and turns, striking a compelling balance as it shifts from aching family trauma to moments of blithe comedy. As the Farleys regain their footing and gradually become comfortable with the family’s altered gender makeup, the proceedings occasionally take on a wryly funny tone. In one jubilant scene Clair—who by now is well on her way towards making the transition from male to female—attempts to shoot clay pigeons out of the sky with an old high school classmate. As she puts the shotgun to her shoulder and pulls the trigger, her exhilaration is ultimately triumphant.

A unity of vision

Co-director Brooke Sebold initially met Mark Farley when he moved into her San Francisco apartment in 2003. As they became friends, the idea for the project grew out of their closeness. “I trusted her from the beginning,” says Mark. “I knew she had grappled with gender stereotypes herself and I could tell she wanted to tell the story with respect to both of us and our family.”

It was especially important to Sebold to explore, not exploit the subject matter. Keeping Mark involved with the creative process of making the film was a natural decision for her and her co-directors. “We intentionally approached the project as if this was the film that he would have made if he were a filmmaker,” Sebold says. “We even gave him a little Sony palmcorder, with which he filmed many of the more intimate scenes himself.”

Long before graduating from Brown University in 2003 with a degree in Visual Art and Film Production, Sebold’s life was dramatically altered by a childhood illness that left her bedridden for over a year. “During that time, movies saved me. I would watch movie after movie,” Sebold reminisced. “I was deeply impressed by seeing Demi Moore do a one-handed pushup in Ridley Scott’s *G.I. Jane*. As I got older, movies like *Capturing the Friedmans*, *Tarnation*, and *Spellbound* started to have a major impact on me. And I became very interested in the personal documentary.”

Co-directors Benita and Todd Sills met one another at Northwestern. “I was ‘that guy’ who would make short films with his friends at the age of 12,” says Todd. “We did recreations of the hanging of Rebecca Nurse. I can remember a very important night for me when my mom thought she was renting *International Velvet* for my slumber party. It later turned out to be David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, and man was it perplexing. Of course, I watched it a few more times before returning it.”

In March of 2004, Brooke met Benita, who had moved from New York in 2002, at the San Francisco-based production house Citizen Film. As the two formed a working relationship, the initial concept for *Red Without Blue* was born. Neither had made a film, much less a feature-length documentary, and so when Todd moved from New York to work on the project, the love triangle of filmmakers was complete.

“It was always a group project,” says Sebold. “A lot of people have asked us if it was difficult to have three directors. The truth is, none of us would have been able to even start making the film much less finish it on our own. It was such a learning experience that we needed each other every step of the way. Benita was our secret weapon. We nicknamed her Ninja Assassin because she took it upon herself to do the dirty work. You know, saying the hard truths that no one wants to hear, like ‘this sequence just isn’t working,’ and so on. Todd, on the other hand, would find a perfect compromise in the problems that we would be having. Plus, he never played favorites with Benita (his wife).”

From here to eternity

With their first feature-length documentary under their belts, the filmmakers overcame the grueling process of applying to film festivals and were rewarded almost immediately. “When we found out that the film had been accepted into Slamdance, we were completely elated. But then we quickly realized that a whole new chapter lay ahead of us,” says Sebold.

December 2006 was a month filled with acquiring a publicist, writing press releases, designing postcards, posters, and other advertising materials, and purchasing winter clothing for the snowy

mountains of Park City. Benita lost her voice just in time for the first screening. Todd’s rental car slid off the road and into a snow bank, losing its bumper. Brooke came down with the flu. And so when *Red Without Blue* won the Audience Award for Best Documentary, the filmmakers were caught so off guard that there was an extraordinary moment of silence before any of them made their way to the stage. “We were so happy that both screenings sold out and that the Q&As had gone well that we honestly didn’t even consider the prospect of winning anything,” recalls Sebold. “This is such a wonderful award to win. And it means mainstream audiences can relate to the film as well.”

For Clair, the process of making the film was a monumental moment in her life. “I realized a long time ago that by the time this film would be completed, I would have had my operation. It’s been a spiritual experience for me and now, I’m not sure where it will take me. And in fact, I just realized something: I’m not as ‘open-book’ as I thought I was. And ironically, it took a documentary to figure that out.”

For each member of the Farley family, the making of *Red Without Blue* became an integral part of one family’s healing and catharsis. Both parents, in their own ways, had the opportunity to “show up” for their children. For Mark, the film represents just one moment in the trajectory of his life. “It’s surreal to see yourself from a few years ago and think, ‘That person is me!’” he says. “The film is like a time capsule. And just because it ends for audiences, it doesn’t mean my life is completed!”

As the filmmakers prepare to solicit a distributor and ponder which steps to take next, they are determined to get *Red Without Blue* into a theater near you. “The film is about family, and how the members of your family may or may not become the people you expected them to,” says Sebold. “I hope it will help shed light on LGBT issues, as well as strike a chord in families who are going through their own transitions.”

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