

**CHELSEA'S BLUES:
A DOCUMENTARY OF HOPE ABOUT GROWING UP IN YOUTH CARE**

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The documentary 'Chelsea's Blues' tells the story of Chelsea Smekens-Demedts (19). She was placed in youth care shortly after her birth. Danny Keuppens, as a narrative counselor, made this film in collaboration with his son Warre. He takes us through the cocreation process and shows what this can set in motion.



Letting young people tell their stories

Two years ago, I created the performance 'Dossier O' for Parcoeur, a project of the youth care facility called 'Stappen'. It was a musical about the traumatising events in the life of Kailey Schokaert, a girl who was being guided by Stappen.

Chelsea, also staying in Stappen at that time, saw the performance and said to me afterwards, "I want this too." Her remark wasn't just a fleeting fancy, because in the following weeks and months, whenever I ran into her, the first thing she would ask was, "When are we going to make a play about me?"

This is something that often happens. Many young people don't like to talk to counsellors and caregivers, but when you address them as curious interviewers or directors, a context seems to emerge that does invite them to talk about their lives.

I hesitate to respond to Chelsea's request. Her mood swings a lot during this period, and creating a theatre production requires a lot of perseverance. It's not intended to be a failure experience.

When the organisation I work for decides to participate in the 'Life Story Work Project' by CANO Flanders, I can no longer ignore Chelsea's request. Life Story Work is a practice developed in the United Kingdom. In Flanders, the methodology was introduced by CANO Flanders in collaboration with Veerle Soyez (Free University of

Brussels). It involves young people in youth care, along with a process facilitator and significant others from their lives, looking back and co-constructing more coherent and hopeful stories about their lives and relationships.

Chelsea is immediately enthusiastic. Her life still has its ups and downs, but the eagerness to participate in the project is present.

Documentary

During the initial meetings with Chelsea, we create a timeline of her life. We discuss, using the Tree of Life approach, who has been important in her life so far and to whom she has been important.

I film her during these sessions and notice that the camera has an effect on her. Chelsea often has difficulty maintaining her focus, but now she stays concentrated for more than an hour. The camera helps her focus. I also notice how well she comes across on screen. It seems to offer her the possibility to present herself 'on stage' in a way that fits.

Together, we decide not to make a play, but rather a documentary about her life. From then on, a cameraman, Warre Keuppens, accompanies us and becomes part of the process.

Life Story Work

According to this particular Life Story Work approach, the process facilitator interviews the young person about the questions they want to ask two significant people in their lives. The facilitator then visits these two people, asks them the questions, and brings back the responses to the young person.

However, I opt for a different approach. From previous conversations, I know that many people were and are important in Chelsea's life. I ask her to choose five. Together, we will visit these five to interview them. That is the premise of the documentary.

The interactions, conversations and new stories that can arise in this way seem more powerful to me and open more possibilities than the indirect approach. Chelsea also becomes a co-director of the process. After some deliberation, she chooses five people: her juvenile judge, her former neighbor Vanessa, her best friend Lola, the person responsible of a care farm Robert, and her father.

A sense of belonging

During our first day of filming, we interview Chelsea about these five people: 'What is their contribution to her life?' In the following days of shooting, we visit them and turn the focus around: 'What has Chelsea contributed to their lives?'

During this process we also include someone we can't speak to, Natasja. She is Chelsea's mother. When Chelsea was ten, she committed suicide in prison. Chelsea, the apple of her eye, is the last person her mother calls. Chelsea is a spitting image of her mother. It's as if she continues to live through her. After the conversation about her mother, we go with Chelsea to lay flowers on her grave.

Young people in youth care often have many experiences of loss. Sometimes these are the result of a death, sometimes of ruptures caused by placement or constant moving.

These young people sometimes feel like they're alone in the world. In telling and sharing stories through 're-membering' conversations about who they've lost, people can be conjured back, even if they're deceased. By sharing memories, young people remember, get re-linked with their beloved ones and they regain a feeling of belonging.

A sense of coherence

During her youth, Chelsea lived in more than ten different youth care facilities, the relationship with her father went on and off, significant people disappeared.... When young people move so often from one institution to another or have several relational ruptures, gaps can appear in their life story as well as single stories about how things could happen. They can lose the connection with who and what is valuable in life and in this way, they seem to lose track in life. Their sense of coherence decreases (Vermeire, 2023).

Chelsea has many questions about the first twelve years of her life. She wants to ask these questions to the juvenile judge. When we visit her juvenile judge, three huge piles of files immediately make it clear that reconstructing Chelsea's life story will be a challenging endeavor.

And even when we do find bits and pieces of the puzzle here and there, it doesn't immediately make the picture brighter. Chelsea has to adjust her image of her mother: the information from the juvenile judge indicates that her mother struggled with a severe drug addiction, was very lost, and mostly showed little involvement. I try to ask questions that spark glimmers of hope, but that hope is dashed each time.

I ask Chelsea if she finds it difficult, but she answers convincingly that she doesn't. For her, it seems more like clearing things up. Something she suspected is now confirmed. Better and richer understanding of what happened makes her less vulnerable and helpless. It won't be the last time I admire how Chelsea deals with the contradictions, ambivalences and painful experiences in her life. A skill that seems to grow even larger and stronger through the making of the documentary.

Complicated relationship with father

The relationship characterised most by ambivalence is the one with her father. She speaks of him with a lot of love and concern. She has fond memories of the times they went to soccer matches together.

On her upper arm, she has a tattoo of a man in an KAA Gent (their hometown soccer club) shirt with a child on his shoulders. She says about this: "At this moment, it's my most meaningful tattoo, because my father is very ill. Many people get a tattoo after the death of someone they love, but I got this tattoo before his death, so that he knows. I think my father sometimes has in the back of his mind that I don't love him. I don't want him to die with that idea. A lot has happened, but he remains my father."

But Chelsea is also open in front of the camera about what has happened between them, especially about his aggression and the times he has hit her. When we interview her father at his home, she is more cautious. Even when I invite Chelsea a few weeks later to show the documentary to her father together, she hesitates.

At the same time, she says I should definitely show the entire documentary, even the parts he will struggle with. Perhaps the documentary is a way for her to tell her father something she hasn't said yet, a way to take relational ownership.

Visiting her father

In the days leading up to my visit to her father to show him the final version of the documentary, I am restless. I feel physically that I am at a junction of connections and storylines. I experience something of what maybe is happening in the relationship between Chelsea and her father.

When I ring the doorbell, I am in discomfort. I start the documentary. After just a few minutes, the father and I hear Chelsea saying that she was placed because of her parents' drug addiction, aggression, and criminal behavior. I look a little scared at the father... but he confirms, "She can say that, because it's true, I made mistakes."

During the viewing, Chelsea's father is moved to tears. Afterwards, he tells her how proud he is of her. He immediately sends a message to let her know. When I ask him if he will talk to her about it again, he says no: "We will look at each other and know enough."

What the visit makes clear to me is that in this kind of Life Story Work, it's not just about co-constructing a life story. It's also, and maybe primarily, relational and contextual work that tries to make something possible in the relationships between the young person and the people in their environment and in this way opening up new experiences and stories.

Experiencing ownership

After the documentary filming is completed, Sabine Vermeire as a therapist conducts a 'life review interview'. Witnessing this interview was artist Anje Claeys. She responded to Chelsea's stories through 'scribing': being present, attentively listening and resonating to what emerges, documenting through drawing.



In the interview, Chelsea talks about how sharing experiences, emotions, and stories has contributed to experiencing personal and relational agency: "I hope the documentary will lead to people listening to me. Many people only know part of my story."

"Through the documentary, they may better understand why I am so reserved towards people. Until I was eighteen, it wasn't always clear to me why my actions were sometimes rude, or arrogant, or reserved. I think I now see better why this is. Making the documentary has helped me with that."

Hope as a door to a possible future

The interview was only a preliminary conclusion to the journey. The documentary 'Chelsea's Blues' has been shown in the Belgian cinemas.

Chelsea's story has been made public. Supervisors and young people from the youth care facilities where she lived, as well as many people who do not know her, came to watch. It provided new exchanges, perspectives, responses and witnessing. In this

way, it brings new, alternative stories besides the dominant stories and nibbles at dominant discourses about these young people's lives.

For Chelsea, showing the documentary is important because, by sharing her life story, she also wants to help other young people: "I hope that young people who are eighteen or people with drug problems watch the documentary and decide to work on themselves first before bringing a child into the world. It would go a long way if they think about it, because I think sometimes they don't realise what they are doing to children. Bringing a child into the world and not looking at it... that doesn't work. We are not toys. We are human beings."

Parcoeur's theatre performances and films are therefore also always a form of social action. The events young people talk about are often painful, but their message is hopeful.

This is also confirmed by Chelsea: "The documentary tells a hopeful story. A lot of young people give up. They start running away and lose faith. Many young people give up. They start running away and I don't know what all [sic]. I myself have also thought: 'I can't do it, I'm never going to be able to do it, I'm not strong enough, I'm going to be dead before I'm eighteen'."

"But look: I'm nineteen now, I'm still here. I actually have everything I need: my house, my animals, my job. Thanks to my perseverance. I wish that after seeing the documentary, children in youth care would feel that they should not lose hope."

Vermeire, S. (2023), *Unravelling Trauma and Weaving Resilience with Systemic and Narrative Therapy*, Routledge.

White, M. (2007), *Maps of narrative practice*, New York, Norton.

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