

SPLIT: A must-see film for divorce mediators and their clients

Review by Crystal Thorpe

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Ellen Bruno is a visionary who has found a way to open the hearts of divorcing couples – through the voices of children. Her 28 minute documentary, ***SPLIT: Divorce Through Kids' Eyes***, features intimate interviews with children about day-to-day aspects of their lives – witnessing their parents' divorce and spending time living in both parents' houses. Conceived initially as a support to children of divorce, the film is a potent resource for parents and divorce professionals as well.

I interviewed Bruno in November after being introduced to her film at a conference of the Academy of Professional Family Mediators the previous month. She described coming up with the concept during a conversation with a friend who, as a child, had never talked with anybody about his parents' divorce. He felt like his family was broken, and his experience of holding in his emotions was all-too-common.

Without being able to talk about it, children often construct stories to explain their parents' behavior, she said. They may even interpret the fighting and ongoing tension, coupled with their parents "being really nice to the children" as unspoken evidence that something is wrong with them. For example, during the tense period prior to her own parents' divorce, when a minor illness fueled her imagination as a child, she constructed a story that she was dying, finally demanding to see her doctor – "If I'm dying, I deserve to know!"

Divorce "is a big drama," Bruno continued during our interview; "the gift is being able to have the conversation." Often though, children don't share what's on their minds with parents. "When they see their parents stressed-out or sad, they don't want to add to the [stress of] the divorce." She hopes that by giving parents the chance to hear what their kids aren't telling them, her film will help parents be more open to talking with their kids, and also that parents will be motivated to make different choices.

The film features exclusively the voices of children and their experiences. As Bruno began talking with them, she was delighted by their wisdom and surprised at how much they had to say. "It was really clear what the kids wanted to talk about. Most kids feel it's their fault. Most kids want to change it. And most kids want their parents back together even if they have already gotten remarried."

She asked children to speak about what they would want to share with other kids – "the good, the bad, and the ugly." And she asked them to be honest, explaining that otherwise, "the other kids won't believe you."

When watching the film, it's clear that the children are indeed being honest. There's a presence they bring, and some of the emotion still feels raw. When one of the children, Trevor, talks about his dad not

showing up at his fifth grade graduation, his face reveals more of the pain than his words. Such pain can make parts of the film difficult to watch for parents, and in focus groups, parents tended to want the message softened. But the children in focus groups asked to see more of the “hard stuff” – and more of Trevor.

“This is really comforting to kids – to know they are being told truth” says Bruno. “Their struggles are affirmed, and their pain is affirmed.”

And even with the pain, the ultimate message of the movie is one of hope. “These kids are funny and alive, and have the perspective that things are OK for the most part.... [For children watching the film,] seeing other kids who have gone through [divorce] is helpful. Kids think everything will last forever, but these kids are actually acting like they are enjoying life.”

The film is punctuated by artwork drawn by children (many of whom are featured in the film) – curated mostly from boxes under their beds – and animated by a team bringing experience from Sesame Street and Pixar. The animation sequences “honor [children’s] fears or dreams, or allow them to go into a fantasy world...” said Bruno. “The crude simple movements started to take on energy.” The end result is visually captivating, skillfully drawing viewers into the children’s worlds.

Behind the camera, award-winning cinematographer Ellen Kuras and her team capture facial expressions and hand movements that speak volumes. The film is also beautifully edited – with subtle elegant transitions (such as when one girl’s eyes seem to follow the previous animated sequence to the moon before beginning to speak). Melancholy, airy, and whimsical acoustic music helps match and shift the mood.

But the stars of the film are the children themselves. Their frankness and resilience shines. They range in age from 6 – 12, and represent diverse backgrounds and family structures. They talk about the challenges of adjusting to limited time and access to each parent, and the unexpected benefits (seven Christmases one year!) as well. And they offer suggestions to both kids and parents on what helps.

Jonah, a boy who seems to have come to a comfortable place, despite initial shock that his parents were separating, shares: “I think it’s kind of nice that my parents...told me that I could go over to either house that I wanted, if I really missed the other person. That’s what really helped for me.”

When new partners are inevitably introduced to the mix, the children have wisdom to share here, as well. Jonah worked up the courage to ask his dad if it was OK if he liked his mother’s boyfriend, “and he said it was fine, so that helped.” Says another child, Jane: “I have a list of what my parent’s girlfriend/boyfriend needs to be. I have a ‘must be’ list and a ‘may be’ list. He or she needs to respect my mom and me, or my dad and me, and needs to respect our stuff, and needs to really adore the parent. Really.” (You’ll have to watch the film to learn where a fondness for snakes ends up on the list!)

When I asked Bruno what was most surprising to her while making the film, she spoke about “how universal kids’ experiences are.... It doesn’t mean that there aren’t variations – but [divorce] is something that is profoundly hard for children. Into their adulthood they continue to wish that either it

didn't happen, or that their parents would get back together, and they have the idea that something they did contributed to the divorce, and that somehow they can fix it.... Kids stayed up at night plotting about how to fix it and get their parents back together."

She was also surprised at "what effective teachers they are, speaking from their hearts." Bruno's dream is that "this piece of heart can be integrated into the divorce process in some way...to help families have a different conversation in a way that's most supportive for all involved."

"The fact that kids find the movie comforting and affirming is deeply satisfying" and she's eager to share the message with parents that there are lots of options for them that can create not only less suffering for their children, but also less suffering for themselves. If parents are "primed" with the voice of kids by watching the film prior to entering a mediation session or a courtroom, they'll be more likely to "work from their hearts rather than from their bitterness."

To complement the movie, Bruno and her team are developing an activity book for kids, along with guides for families and professionals on how to use the film. She's optimistic about the potential impact based on what she's already witnessed. "If you can bring people into a place of love for their children, then anything is possible."

Crystal Thorpe is a mediator and Principal of Agreement Resources, LLC and its division, Elder Decisions®. She mediates divorce and elder / adult family conversations. She and her colleagues are celebrating Agreement Resources' 10th anniversary with a free screening of *SPLIT* followed by a conversation with Director and Producer Ellen Bruno on Friday morning, February 14th, 2014, at the Wellesley Public Library, in Wellesley, Massachusetts. All are welcome to attend. Learn more and register at www.agreementresources.com; for more about SPLIT see www.splitfilm.org. Crystal can be contacted at crystal@AgreementResources.com or by calling 617-621-7009, x24.