

STUDY GUIDE: MY IDENTITY



MY IDENTITY ABOUT THE PROJECT

We are giving current and former foster youth a voice by creating a series of films about the foster care experience. Foster youth are sharing their stories as well as working behind the scenes as production assistants, camera operators, developers and so much more.

Through film and media we intend to dispel negative stereotypes about foster care by letting the youth themselves be heard. By educating general audiences about foster care we can inspire prospective foster parents, mentors or advocates to take action within their communities.

My Identity is the second film in our Foster Care Film series.



Yasmin Mistry

Director/Producer

Yasmin Mistry is an Emmy-nominated animator and filmmaker. Her work has been displayed worldwide including recent showings at the White House, United Nations and the Louvre, as well as at film festivals such as Cannes, SXSW, Tribeca and Clermont-Ferrand. She is the recipient of the Puffin Foundation's 2013 film grant, the Brooklyn Arts Council's 2014 and 2015 film grants, and a finalist for the Real Ideas Studio Micro-grant. When not working as an artist, Yasmin dedicates her time to the foster youth of New York City. As a Court Appointed Special Advocate, she received the 2012 Advocate of The Year Award for her dedication to obtaining services for foster care children with special needs. Yasmin was inspired to create this film when she realized the voices of the children she worked with were not being heard and their stories never told.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER



MY IDENTITY FILM SYNOPSIS

Ashley, a young Native American Caucasian girl, converts to Islam in hopes of finding structure in a life where it never existed. Surrounded by drugs and alcohol, at age 8 Ashley became a ward of the state. She is separated from her brother and shuffled between the homes of extended family members where she bears witness to prostitution, drug dealing and her own mother's overdose.

As a teenager, Ashley seeks stability and unexpectedly finds it in the Muslim hip-hop community. Ashley is drawn to the structure of the Islamic faith and believes these will prevent her from following in her family's footsteps of substance abuse. But this newfound stability is also the cause of a growing rift between herself and her estranged brother, who is stationed in Afghanistan as a member of the U.S. Military.



MY IDENTITY ABOUT ASHLEY

Ashley Wolford was in the foster care system for over a decade. Since aging out of the Illinois foster care system at age 21, Ashley has worked as a childcare provider. She enjoys working with children, in part, because she was not able to experience childhood herself.

Ashley hopes to improve society through her activism in issues of social justice and human rights. She is currently a student at the American Islamic College where she is pursuing a degree in Islamic studies. When not working or studying, she is following her passion for the arts by coordinating hip-hop shows for the Islamic community.



“ I wouldn't necessarily say I survived foster care. I feel like there are a lot of things that I have to cope with today as a result of being in foster care.”

*“I essentially wanted anyone to adopt me because I just wanted to be part of someone else's **family.**”*

– Ashley Wolford

4%

of ALL children in the U.S. are in kinship care.¹ 11% of these children are placed by the state. The other 89% are in informal arrangements.²



29%

of children in the U.S. foster care system are taken care of by extended family.³



**KINSHIP
CARE**

63%

of children in public and private kinship care are living below 200% of the poverty line.⁴



*“I didn’t want to be separated, but then I didn’t realize at the time it was **permanent**. No one asked my opinion or cared what I thought. I think I had over 30 caseworkers.”*

– Ashley Wolford

SOURCES:

1. <http://www2.gu.org/OURWORK/Grandfamilies/GrandfamiliesStatistics.aspx>
2. <http://jacsw.uic.edu/kinicare/research/ExecutiveSummary-2-26-08.pdf>
3. <https://www.fosterclub.com/article/statistics-foster-care>
4. <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-SteppingUpForKids-2012.pdf>

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FOSTER YOUTH

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

MY IDENTITY

1. Have you ever been separated from your siblings? What is/was it like? How could people within the foster care system have better helped you maintain your sibling relationships?
2. How did Ashley cope with the challenges she experienced while in foster care? What kind of support would have been helpful for Ashley growing up?
3. Ashley states that she had over 30 caseworkers. What impact do you think this had on Ashley's experiences in foster care? How do you think it would have been different if she had worked with fewer caseworkers?
4. What role did religion play in Ashley's life? What do you think it would be like to practice a religion different from that of your family?
5. People can identify themselves by their race, religion, job and other aspects of their lives. What are some ways that Ashley identifies herself and why?
6. Ashley talked about her culture as an important aspect of her life. Is culture an important part of your life? If so, how? If not, would you want it to be? How can people in your life (family, friends, teachers, mentors) help you to feel more connected to your cultural roots?
7. How did Ashley go about forming her identity despite having limited information about her family and culture? What helped you form your identity?

8. There are many places where youth are able to find mentors. Ashley found a mentor and a sense of belonging in the Islamic community. What are some other ways, or places, where youth can connect with potential mentors?

DVD EXTRA: Snapshots: Impact

What are some ways you were affected by entering the foster care system? How were you able to learn and grow from these experiences in foster care?

DVD EXTRA: Snapshots: Aging Out

Ashley discussed how she felt unsupported during the aging out process. What is the aging out process like in your home state? Are education, housing, health care and other basic needs supported? In what way is the system working and in what ways can it be improved?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY:

You are currently in foster care and have just been told that you and your siblings will be separated. You tell the foster agency that you want to remain in the same home as your siblings but they are not able to accommodate this request. You are tired of not being heard and decide it is time for change in the foster care system. You contact the state capitol to submit a list of reforms you want to see enacted. What is on this list?

Discuss:

How you would implement these changes?
What obstacles might you run into?

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FOSTER PARENTS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

MY IDENTITY

1. What do you think it is like for a foster youth to be separated from their siblings? If you are fostering siblings that are separated, what would you do to help them maintain these connections?
2. How did Ashley cope with the challenges she experienced while in foster care? As a foster parent how would you help a child cope?
3. What support could Ashley's biological mother have received, prior to her overdose, so that Ashley could have returned home? As a foster parent how can you help children maintain their relationships with biological parents if they choose to do so?
4. Ashley states that she had over 30 caseworkers. What impact do you think this had on Ashley's experiences in foster care? How do you think it would have been different if she had worked with fewer caseworkers?
4. What role did religion play in Ashley's life? What do you think it would be like to practice a religion different from that of your family? Have you ever been in this situation with a foster youth and how did/would you handle it?
5. Ashley talked about her culture as an important aspect of her life. What could help kids like her feel more connected to their culture? As a foster parent, how can you help?
6. People identify themselves by their race, religion, job and other aspects of their lives. How does Ashley identify herself and why?

7. How did Ashley go about forming her identity despite having limited information about her family and culture? How can you help a foster youth who is struggling with their background and cultural identity?

DVD EXTRA: Snapshots: Impact

What are some ways in which a child is affected by entering the foster care system? How can you, as a foster parent, help a foster child learn and grow from their experiences in the child welfare system? What can be done to change the system and lessen the negative impact that may be left on a child?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY:

Find a partner for a role play exercise. One person will act as the foster parent and the other will be the foster child. For the next 3 - 5 minutes the foster child should ask questions to the foster parent about where they came from (biological parents/siblings, ethnicity, race etc.). The foster child is aware that they are of mixed ethnicity but does not have any memories of their biological family and is currently not in contact with them. The foster parent will have to figure out how to best respond to these questions.

Now find a new partner and switch roles.

Discuss:

What was it like to be the foster child and not know about your own background? As a foster parent were you comfortable answering the foster child's questions? What was the most challenging part? What information or support do you wish you had? What would you do differently in the future?

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ADVOCATES & PROFESSIONALS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

MY IDENTITY

1. What do you think it is like for a foster youth to be separated from their siblings? From a policy point of view, how can we prevent this from happening to other foster youth?
2. What are the challenges Ashley experienced in foster care and how did she cope with them? How can you help the youth you work with navigate these challenges?
3. Ashley states that she had over 30 caseworkers. What impact do you think this had on Ashley's experiences in foster care? How do you think it would have been different if she had worked with fewer caseworkers? What can you do to minimize turnover in your own organization?
4. What support could Ashley's biological mother have received, prior to her overdose, so that Ashley could have returned home? As a foster parent how can you help children maintain their relationships with biological parents if they choose to do so?
5. What kind of role did religion play in Ashley's life? What do you think it would be like to practice a religion different from that of your family? Have you ever been in this situation with a foster youth and how did/would you handle it?
6. How did Ashley go about forming her identity despite having limited (or little) information about her family and culture? How can you help a foster youth who is struggling with their background and cultural identity?

7. People or individuals identify themselves by their race, religion, job and other aspects of their lives . How does Ashley identify herself and why?

8. Ashley talked about her culture as an important aspect of her life. What could help foster kids in similar situations feel more connected to their culture? How can the system evolve to incorporate these new ideas into trainings and take them into consideration when placing a youth in foster care?

DVD EXTRA: Snapshots: Impact

What are some ways in which a child is affected by entering the foster care system? From a policy perspective, what can be done to change the system and lessen the negative impact that may be left on a child?

DVD EXTRA: Snapshots: Aging Out

Ashley discussed how she felt unsupported during the aging out process. It was especially difficult due to the health issues she was facing at the time. As her advocate or social worker what could do you to help her get the health care she needed? What other steps would you take to make the overall process easier for Ashley?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY:

List three of the most important aspects of your identity. What makes these important to you? Pretend that you have to take away one of them. Which one would you choose and why? What would you feel like without this aspect?

Find a partner and discuss your answers.



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WHAT IS ICWA?

Although we do not believe Ashley was affected by this policy, ICWA is relevant to many Native American children in foster or adoptive homes.

"ICWA" stands for the Indian Child Welfare Act, which is a federal law passed in 1978. ICWA was passed in response to the alarmingly high number of Indian children being removed from their homes by both public and private agencies. The intent of Congress under ICWA was to "protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families." ICWA sets federal requirements that apply to state child custody proceedings involving an Indian child who is a member of or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe.

When ICWA applies to a child's case, the child's tribe and family will have an opportunity to be involved in decisions affecting services for the Indian child. A tribe or a parent can also petition to transfer jurisdiction of the case to their own tribal court. ICWA sets out federal requirements regarding removal and placement of Indian children in foster or adoptive homes and allows the child's tribe to intervene in the case. ICWA does not apply to divorce proceedings, intra-family disputes, juvenile delinquency proceedings, or cases under tribal court jurisdiction.

excerpt from: <http://www.nicwa.org/>

DISCUSS:

Under ICWA, preference is given to Native American family members, then to other tribal members, then to members of outside tribes. If these options have been exhausted then the child can be fostered or adopted by a non-Native American family. Discuss the positives and negatives of this law as they apply to children in the foster care system.

“There are a lot of **indigenous** children that are forced into the foster care system, and they end up having absolutely no link to their heritage. It’s basically like having your culture torn from you.”

– Ashley Wolford

STUDY GUIDE KEY ISSUES

Belonging
Culture
Child Welfare
Family
Heritage
Identity
Kinship Care
Native American Foster Youth
Neglect
Religion and Spirituality
Sibling Relationships
Structure
Substance Abuse

RELATED RESOURCES

Kinship Care

<http://www.grandfamilies.org>
<http://www.gu.org>
<http://www.grandfactsheets.org>
<https://www.childwelfare.gov>
<http://www.nrcpfc.org>

National Indian Child Welfare

<http://www.nicwa.org/>

Become a Foster or Adoptive Parent

<http://www.adoptuskids.org/for-families>

Become an Advocate

<http://www.casaforchildren.org>

Foster Care Statistics By State

<http://www.bu.edu/ssw/usfostercare/>

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GLOSSARY

BIOLOGICAL PARENTS

The person(s) who gave birth or fathered the child.

CASEWORKER

Works with youth and their families to provide services and support with the goal of permanent placement for the youth.

CUSTODY

The care, control, and maintenance of a child, which can be legally awarded by the court to an agency in abuse and neglect cases, or to parents in divorce, separation, and adoption proceedings. Child welfare departments retain legal custody and control over the major decisions for a child that is in foster care. Foster parents do not have legal custody of the children that are in their care.

FOSTER CARE

Care provided to youth when they are removed from their biological family's custody and are placed in state custody. Foster care includes placement with relatives, foster families, group homes, and shelters.

FOSTER HOME

A home where a youth may live while in the custody of the State's Child Welfare system.

GRANDFAMILIES

Families headed by relatives who are sharing their homes with their grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and/or other related children.

KINSHIP CARE

Placement of a foster child in the home of someone who is related to the child by family ties or by a significant prior relationship connection.

INDIAN CHILD WELFARE ACT

A Federal law that gives Native American Indian Nations and Tribes, including the Alaskan Aleuts, the right to control foster care and adoptions that involve their tribal members, the children of their tribal members and those individuals that could become tribal members.

NEGLECT

The failure of the person responsible for the care of a child to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical care or supervision necessary for the child's health and welfare.

SIBLING GROUP

A sibling group is a group of two or more siblings. Most child welfare agencies have a policy to keep siblings together when in foster care, and for the purpose of permanency planning, although this does not always happen in practice.

WARD [OF THE COURT]

A child or youth who has a guardian appointed by the court to care for and take responsibility for them. A governmental agency may take temporary custody of a young person if the child is suffering from parental neglect or abuse, or has been in trouble with the law.

MY IDENTITY FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

with Director/Producer Yasmin Mistry

HOW DOES THIS FILM FIT INTO THE LARGER SCOPE OF YOUR WORK WITH KIDS IN FOSTER CARE?

The initial concept was to create an animated documentary short, but once we started going through our footage we realized we had much more material than could possibly fit into one film. We selected a particular story to focus on for the animated documentary but realized the other stories we collected were too important to end up on the cutting room floor.

As a result, we are now making a series of live action short films about foster care as well as the animated documentary. We are using these live action films to promote education and awareness about foster care, and we have developed a program around it called the Foster Care Film and Community Engagement Program (FCFCEP). "My Identity" is the second film in this series.

WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS FILM?

After three years working with a developmentally-delayed child, I picked up my phone to hear a little voice saying, "Mama." This was Ana's first word and her foster mother had called me, her Court Appointed Special Advocate, to share the experience. As a CASA volunteer, I've spent years working with children, their families and the court system to help find kids a permanent home, good educational opportunities and needed medical and social services. As I heard Ana find her voice, I wondered how, and whether, other foster youth ever truly found theirs. So I decided to answer this question using the tools I knew best, animation and film, to give foster youth a chance to be heard.

HOW DO YOU FIND YOUR SUBJECTS/INTERVIEWEES?

I reached out to foster youth via social media and received an overwhelming response. It became even more apparent to me that foster youth wanted to be heard. After a few months, I had collected far more stories than I could possibly fit into a single film. So, as interest grew, the project grew with it.

HOW ARE FOSTER YOUTH PARTICIPATING IN THIS FILM AND THE PROJECT AS A WHOLE?

We are not only helping youths' voices be heard through film. We are providing foster youth the opportunity to participate in the project by working behind the scenes as camera operators, production assistants, writers and more. We are also giving foster youth an opportunity to speak to social workers, lawyers, judges and other changemakers in the foster care community by having them be key participants in our community screenings and presentations.

WHAT TYPE OF IMPACT DO YOU HOPE TO HAVE WITH THIS FILM?

We hope this film will help give a voice to numerous marginalized communities such as foster youth, Native Americans and those of Muslim faith. Our goal is for *My Identity* to inspire audiences to take action within their communities. We hope to educate general audiences about foster care and inspire prospective foster parents and mentors to take the next step. We also hope to educate social workers, advocates and decision-makers about the importance of biological sibling relationships and the need to maintain these relationships.