

## Changing times and challenging lives



Photo courtesy of riverfilms Director Kavery Kaul with Eric, while his mother Susan looks on.

### *Filmmaker dissects assumptions about identity*

BY SCOTT STIFFLER | Lives can, and do, change — unexpectedly, significantly and in an instant. Although it takes considerably longer, the character of a neighborhood is just as vulnerable to unforeseen upheaval.

India-born, U.S.-raised Kavery Kaul, a documentarian whose body of work dissects and challenges assumptions about identity, put together “Back Walking Forward” in the neighborhood she’s called home for over two decades. Like the film’s main character, the area surrounding Kaul’s Flower District loft is something more — and something very different — than it used to be.

“I moved in before Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods and even Garden of Eden arrived,” she says of the supermarkets that (along with other upscale ventures) represent the neighborhood’s still-evolving character. “It’s rapidly changing into the Hotel District,” Kaul says of her formerly low-key stomping grounds. “Chelsea used to be one of New York’s best kept secrets...the disarray on the streets, the flowers of all colors and types.”

Providing a snapshot anecdote that perfectly illustrates the changing times, Kaul recalls a fairly recent incident in which some thoroughly disoriented French tourists stopped her for directions. “I was walking down Sixth Ave., and they were looking for the flea market. It’s gone, I said, replaced by a high rise apartment. There are so many restaurants now, so many hotels. It’s become a very known, and even fashionable, neighborhood.”



Photo courtesy of riverfilms...Eric learns the harmonica with his father Isaac.

But has the neighborhood been altered to its detriment? “Well,” she says, not diplomatically so much as philosophically, “I miss the flower stores that have been chased out...but I love the fruit vendors on the street who speak Bengali like I do, and they’re there because there are more buyers in Chelsea now. I’m glad many members of the arts community have stayed on. We have our loft spaces, which we would never give up. But I miss the smaller arts organizations that have had to shut down because of skyrocketing costs.”

Although the Chelsea of today is “not buzzing with post production and DVD authoring facilities,” laments Kaul, she did manage to develop her film with support from the Women’s Media Center (on West 25 Street), and edited it at Radical Avid (on Seventh Avenue and 30th Street). Longtime neighborhood resident Beo Morales and his partner Brooks William collaborated with Kaul on the music and sound design. In that manner, says Kaul, the vibrant loft culture still “lends itself to the needs of someone in the arts. I have no intention of moving.”

That stubborn survivor's resolve has also thoroughly gripped the family Kaul gives voice to in "Back Walking Forward." Chronicling a year in the life of a man recovering from a brain injury, the documentary takes a fiercely unsentimental look at what Eric Michalowski, his parents and his brother must do to forge a new life for themselves after Eric is hit by a van while bicycling in his Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn neighborhood. Now confined to a wheelchair, Eric's global head injury changes his life, and that of his family, forever.

"Brain injury is the major cause of disability in Brooklyn, in Chelsea and in the whole world today...whether it's car accidents, a sports injury or a wartime bomb explosion," Kaul says, citing one of the reasons she chose the topic as her focus. As for why she chose the Michalowski family to represent the face of brain injury, Kaul explains, "I was drawn to Eric — his truths and untruths, the profound and the poignant, and his awareness of what's really important in life. I wanted to enter his inner world and trace his family's quest for a new normal in the face of such enormous uncertainty."

That urge to represent the profound determination and sacrifice of all involved, without elevating them to sainthood, is what makes Kaul's brisk 40-minute documentary such a compelling experience. Dense with moments of universally recognized character strengths and flaws, these moments of observation often exist independently of anything having to do with brain injury. The scene where Eric's father references the challenges (and perhaps burdens) of caring for their son is followed by a swift rebuke from the mother, then acquiescence from the father that comes from a place of overwhelming empathy for her pain.

That domestic slice of life, which is probably happening millions of places all over the earth as you read this, imbues the family's dynamic with a ring of truth that's both painful and reassuring to watch. Also universally applicable and deeply poignant is an observation made by Eric's neurosurgeon, in reference to his 30th birthday party. She wonders what he's thinking while confined to a wheelchair and surrounded by dancing revelers. Kaul frames that moment in a way that forces us to contemplate how difficult it is to penetrate the internal world of any human being — whether they can articulate their thoughts or not.

But the filmmaker saves her most welcome and unexpected insights for the scenes involving Eric. Although his brother maintains that pre-injury Eric was a serious guy, the man we see struggling to walk and talk again swears, sings, plays harmonica and unleashes a relentless barrage of dirty (and very funny) jokes.

Late in the film, that aforementioned conundrum regarding the futility of seeing inside another person's head is, well, turned on its head. Regarding a dream he had, Eric recalls how his brain exploded, then a dog brought it back to him so he could put it together again.

Crying yet? Don't. Nobody involved, on either side of the camera, is fishing for compliments or looking to ride a wave of sympathy. The only thing they want, Kaul asserts, is precisely what all of us want. "The meaning," she says of her film, "is about the nature of unconditional love. His family is an ordinary family faced with an extraordinary situation. Progress is slow, and we can all learn from watching Eric."