

Conversation with Bill Bregoli
Interview with Kavery Kaul

BB: How did you pick these girls?

KK: It took a year to develop the film, and a large part of that year was spent looking for the right girls. I sent the word out through organizations, institutions, individual contacts, programs, everyone I knew. I knew the film depended on the girls. I wanted girls of different races; different religions; different social, economic, cultural backgrounds. And I also wanted girls of different personalities. I didn't want 3 ice skaters, 3 poets, or 3 girls who responded to situations in the same way.

You know people call *Long Way from Home*, a film about diversity, but what's diversity? As a filmmaker, I'm interested in telling the stories of individual people, trying to fit in, and searching for a place. So each girl is different in her own way, and deals with being different in her own way.

BB: That's true. But you had to choose the schools as well, right?

KK: When the project was in development, for a wild moment there, as a filmmaker, I couldn't stop to think that I don't have a choice as to whether the girls' schools would agree to the project. Of course, I wanted to choose my own girls for the film. I consider that my right as a director. But I had no say in the decision-making process of the schools. So I was very, very lucky that I was able to make all these parallel lines intersect, and that Trinity and Nightingale gave me unprecedented access to film in their schools for a year.

BB: Yes. That's amazing. There are a lot of schools who would say, "No way!".

KK: That's right. Especially about a sensitive subject like this. We had many, many conversations. They knew what the film would be about. To their credit, they accepted the premise.

BB: The schools are obviously trying.

KK: Yes. They just reflect our society as a whole. We're all on this learning curve at a very critical time, when we need to learn fast.

BB: That's right. So, once you got everything set --- you've got the schools and you've got the girls --- then, it's time for life to unfold. And it really does for the girls! It's quite a year, particularly for the one who loses her father. But for the others as well. You start to see the beginning of teenagers pulling away from parents, and yet, they're really close. All of them seem to be close.

KK: I think that's what sees them through the year --- the support they get at home. Whether it's parents that understand the world they've entered, or it's parents that are not at all familiar with it, their parents believe in them, and that sees them through.

BB: Particularly Sarah, the Arabic girl, who seemed to be having a hard time. I thought she made some great observations about what happens when she goes back to Egypt.

KK: That's a story in itself, because we all have our assumptions and our preconceived notions about who the others are, and what their lives are like. I wanted girls from families who had come to America at different times of history for different reasons. Some of them know exactly where they came from. Some of them can go back, and some of them can't. And of course, Sarah goes back to Egypt often. She speaks fluent Arabic and maintains close cultural ties. She also has to deal with the push and pull, the demands of 2 cultures, and the reality of whether one can ever satisfy both.

BB: Right. And Cindy, the Cambodian girl. I was struck by the power of her 2-minute speech. We've all done 2-minute speeches, but not as powerful as hers.

KK: That speech took a lot of courage. It was a very difficult year, to be 14 and to lose your father suddenly in the middle of the year, when you're at a new school, in a new world.

Her fellow students deal with the subject of heroes in a more casual manner. When they give speeches about comic book heroes, it takes courage to get up there and reveal that your mother is a refugee from Cambodia. It's a brave, and at the same time scary, moment for Cindy; one that shakes her, one she'll always remember.

BB: Yes, and I also like the part in the film with Sage, the girl going back to visit Yale with her father. He was telling her what his life was like. I thought that was great.

KK: For the first time in her life, Sage has to deal with the assumptions of people who think if you're not white, you're uneducated. She's forced to grapple with the reality of people who may very well think that she's the first person who's gone to kindergarten in her family. When she knows her mother's a college graduate and her father's gone to Yale, and they've already achieved what the other kids in school may hope to do.

BB: Yes. Right. And they've blazed paths. She thinks it's tough, but times were even tougher back then.

KK: That's right. But out of that year, Sage realizes how well she knows what it means to be black. She finds her voice. And she speaks from a personal experience that means a lot more to me than any expert 's definition of identity.

BB: It's a lot nicer to have a kid explain it. What took you by surprise?

KK: The girls' ability to tap their own feelings, and to articulate their feelings so well. I myself grew up Indian-American, in Philadelphia and New Jersey, in a world where people would always say I spoke English very well. And I couldn't help wondering if that meant that other Americans didn't speak English well!

But times have changed. These girls are much more aware of the issues they face, and much more able to articulate them than I was, or my contemporaries were. Things haven't changed radically, but the girls' understanding and awareness of the challenges facing them, is something that constantly surprised me.

BB: Yes, that's true. When we think of teenagers now, --- it's probably prejudice --- but we think they won't be able to articulate anything except "uh"s and "um"s. But these girls are incredible!

KK: That's right. People think that way about teenagers, but young people are often very articulate if we just sit down quietly and let them talk. While we listen.

They have lots of very profound insights, and they speak with an honesty that most of us have lost. I find that even when the film is shown to young people. When I was making the film, many people insisted the audience would be adults, not young people, because it's not a fast-paced music video or a shocking slice of life. But teenagers respond to the film in very, very thoughtful ways. We tend to denigrate the intelligence level of our youth,

and I don't know if we should. That attitude says a lot more about us, than it does about them.

BB: I liked the scenes when they're talking with their instructors. Giving back. I'd be glad to get that kind of feedback from my peers.

KK: That's their ability to express themselves and make observations about the world around them. And again, I love their honesty. You know, it would be totally "incorrect" to say one would want to be rich, but it's so real. You do aspire to that, if you see so much money around you, and if you don't have it.

BB: Yes. And they do see it around them. It's evidenced by the shots of kids in the hallways.

KK: It's amazing how little has to be said. It's in the way you carry yourself. It's ironic, the confidence that comes from your checkbook alone.

BB: True. Now, because the film's out on dvd, we get some extras. One thing I know is the check-up on the girls today.

KK: In the film, I was really interested in getting that first moment of confrontation, of finding oneself different. I didn't follow them throughout their high school years, because by the end of the film, you realize that these girls are going to make it.

But I found it valuable to go back and see what they're doing now, for the dvd release. And it's wonderful. They've grown; they've matured; they've become very sophisticated young women, very self-assured. And that's what the supplements show. As well as their attitudes. Everyone grows. It's always an act of juggling who we are and who others think we are; and our relationship to all of that evolves constantly.

BB: And they bring a new perspective to it all. That's true. Thanks.