

GIRLSBOYSMIX

“Boys room or ladies room, it doesn’t matter for me”

With GIRLSBOYSMIX, the first new nomination for the ECFA Doc Award 2021 was handed out at the JEF festival. Wen Long is neither a boy nor a girl... she is intersex; at her birth it was unclear whether she was a boy or girl. Her parents leave the choice up to her. As an intersex person, it is difficult to know where you’re standing in a world distinguished between men and women. During the festival, the Dutch embassy facilitated a Q&A with director Lara Aerts, Wen Long and her parents.

Wen Long: We met at the Pride Walk through Amsterdam.

Lara Aerts: Wen Long was the only child in the parade. She was seven years old, she wore a dress in the purple and yellow colours of intersex, and she carried a large flag. At first she walked in the middle of the group, but after a while she moved all the way up to the front. For miles and miles she walked across town, waving her flag. That was such an activist image: look, here’s a child who has nothing to hide! We kept in touch, and now



the time was right to make a short film about her.

Can you explain what intersex exactly means?

Aerts: The common idea is that the world consists of men and women. For a man we expect XY chromosomes, testosterone, a penis and testes; for a

woman XX chromosomes, oestrogen, an uterus, fallopian tubes and a vagina. But 1 in 90 people is born with a body that doesn’t meet the expectations of what a male or female body should look like, or what it should be capable of. What about a woman with XY chromosomes or a man with a little remnant of the uterus? We see men and women as the only possible options, defined by mankind. In reality, there is much more diversity, the biological sex is a spectrum with countless equivalent variations.

Wen Long’s parents: It has been said that intersex is just as common as red-haired people. Everybody knows someone with red hair, so it is not even exceptional.

Do you feel like a boy or girl?

Wen Long: Neutral. I have long hair and I wear dresses, so people usually see me as a girl. I feel like both a boy and a girl, but I like girls’ clothes better. Like the dress I’m wearing today: I designed it myself in yellow and purple, and there is a sign saying “Princess Intersex” across my heart.

Do you sometimes meet other children who are intersex?

Wen Long: Not really.

Wen Long’s parents: Oh yes, you do. We meet other families, but the children hardly realise what binds them; for them it is not such a big thing. We have decided to be very open about it, we don’t want to burden Wen Long with a lifelong secret. Wen Long is fantastic, and she can be just the way she is.

Are you sometimes confronted with people’s lack of understanding?

Wen Long’s parents: At Wen Long’s new school, the ladies rooms were broken. So she shouted loudly through the classroom: boys or girls rooms, it doesn’t matter for me, I can use both. The teacher contacted us, she thought Wen Long was saying weird things. When we explained to her, there was a certain rigidity; things like this were not a part of her world view. After all these years, it is no longer such an important issue for us and so we sometimes forget to inform people thoroughly.



Aerts: There were hardly any negative reactions to the film, except for some messages on social media from people who do not understand, and do not want to understand.

Why did this film absolutely have to be made?

Wen Long: As soon as everyone knows what intersex means, I can stop explaining it all the time. I was already in the papers, I met the audience at Cinekid and I was on the Youth News, but sometimes I explain it and people still can't believe it.

As a filmmaker, what was your main focus?

Aerts: For *GIRLSBOYSMIX* – my very first film! – I mainly wondered how to raise awareness. I followed Wen Long without a camera for a long time to get to know her better. That's how I discovered that she doesn't have many problems with being intersex, except for the ignorance of people and their reactions. Here is a child who does not see the need for making a choice, but then she enters the society where she is constantly confronted with the classic dichotomy: in the toy store, in the shopping street... everywhere.

Wen Long: You filmed me just the way I am.



The result is remarkably light-hearted.

Aerts: Many intersex people carry huge trauma with them, due to secrecy or forced medical interventions. So when talking about intersex, it is often about the pain, the suffering; the first impression rarely sounds positive. In this movie you meet a happy, carefree child. That is why I made it light-hearted: I want to keep the first association with intersex a positive one.

Wen Long's parents: It's not nature's mistake, it is just a part of it all.

Those medical interventions are briefly mentioned in the film.

Wen Long: That is when baby's get an operation right away to make them a boy or girl. But isn't that something a child should decide for itself?

Aerts: As a baby you cannot choose yourself; the choice is made for you. Can't we let intersex children grow up until they are old enough to know what they want to be? You cannot leave such a decision to the parents or doctors.

Wen Long's parents: This usually involves a medically unnecessary procedure, comparable to (irreversible) genital mutilation. In the past, this often happened on the advice of a doctor, but now that awareness is growing, the urge to operate will hopefully

disappear. Isn't it bizarre to operate on people out of precaution?

People nowadays are evolving towards a new openness. Where do you think we will be standing in about 20 years?

Wen Long's parents: Empowerment is super important. Make sure your child is confident, and knows that she can be exactly who she is. If you are happy with who you are, then so will others be.

Wen Long: There was a child who said to me: "Thanks to you I dared to tell it." After seeing the Youth News, she had told her best friend that she is intersex. She hadn't told the whole class, but at least it was no longer her secret.

–
Gert Hermans