

# Janet van den Brand & Timothy Wennekes about WHAT MAKES US BOYS?

## “That running through alleys is still like it used to be”

Together with his younger brother, family, and friends, 12 year old Daan is growing up on camera. In **WHAT MAKES US BOYS?** fragments of Daan's life are combined with the clips that he posts on his YouTube channel, while his voice is leading us deeper into his inner world. Is it a coming-of-age film? A documentary about the digital world of today? A mosaic of funny and awkward moments? Film-makers Janet van den Brand and Timothy Wennekes came to present their film at the JEF festival.

Timothy Wennekes: We wanted to make a film starting from the virtual space that young people use to express themselves, like Daan does. But he stands out among the others because for him this virtual world is but a playful, creative outlet.

Janet van den Brand: We loved the way he presented himself on YouTube. While other kids try to come across as professionals, Daan is totally pure, with his headphones taped together

and his mic not even plugged in; you can see the cable dangling. Then we discovered the huge story behind his YouTube channel: his illness, his transition to high school, his sister who became a brother... By zooming in on a small story, we tell about changes that children go through at that age.

### The entire family is brought under the spotlights.

Wennekes: His parents initially remain in the background, but they are there for Daan whenever he needs them. Those are the moments when they appear more upfront.

### Because of his illness?

Wennekes: EDS (Ehlers-Danlos syndromes) affects the connective tissue, and makes your joints too flexible. Daan is able to do sports, but then sometimes the pain in his joints becomes unbearable, or his arm gets dislocated.

Van den Brand: The disease only manifests itself around the age of 12, when



puberty causes a growth spurt. When we started filming, Daan had only just been diagnosed. It was utterly important for us to make a film about Daan who had a disease, and not about a sick boy named Daan.

### How important was the location to the story?

Wennekes: Daan lives in a neighbourhood, just next to the one where I grew up. I was born and raised there. The gang I had with my brothers was always at war with other neighbour-

hood kids; we made our own blowpipes and axes. I remember how important those alleys were to us. Children play in all kinds of ways today, but all that running through alleys is still exactly like it used to be. And there is a central playground where you gather with your friends, like Daan and his neighbour Axel do. Van den Brand: Daan's small world, in which you go to school on a scooter, suddenly opens up. Suddenly you have to cycle to school and your life no longer revolves around your own



residential area. This has a major impact on the bond between Daan and Sam, who still lives in that safe bubble.

### **Daan experiences this new school as an enormous change.**

Van den Brand: He was in a lot of pain during this period; EDS gets worse when you feel insecure. The school had a lot of understanding for his needs, but there are always practical obstacles that Daan has to overcome: thresholds, iron doors...

Wennekes: This says something about our society. Just when your body is going through its biggest change, you are brutally taken away from your familiar surroundings. Exactly at the moment when your need for certainty is the highest, you are offered maximum uncertainty. Men's greatest fear is the one to be noticed. Everywhere I go with my camera, passers-by always look at the lens. But when we followed Daan on his first day of school, no one looked at me. Everyone looked at him in his rattling chair. All the kids in that busy hallway turned their heads towards him.

### **You started the project with an enormous treasure in footage.**

Wennekes: In addition to the recordings we made ourselves in 2018 and



2019, his YouTube channel contained at least 1000 videos, in which you see a young Daan at work at the age of six. He literally grew up on YouTube.

Van den Brand: After Timothy had made a first selection, I dedicated three weeks to listing all the usable fragments. Such a bliss for a filmmaker! I like found footage; sifting through those videos was like a dream coming true.

### **I smile when thinking back to the scene in which Axel swings across the river on "a vine" and ends up with a wet suit...**

Van den Brand: ... and then takes the time to pose! Axel lives by the idea: a day spent without falling is a day wasted.

### **After two years of filming, you must have almost felt like a part of the family.**

Wennekes: We bonded from the first moment. We often had coffee with them. Actually, chilling with Daan's parents on the couch was a crucial part of the filming process.

Van den Brand: We always loved hanging out with that family; it's a bond for life. After my first interview with Daan I was deeply moved. He told us such beautiful things, sometimes very mature for his age, and sometimes very childlike. I didn't want anyone around during those conversations. Even if sometimes things went wrong with the sound recording (for which I was also responsible), in terms of content these were the best moments. Daan could express very clearly how he felt and indicate when he was worried about something. In his family everything could be discussed. We found him chatting with his mother about sexual education while washing dishes.

### **I appreciated how you brought structure and beauty in a location like a living room, which is chaotic by nature. Or the quiet moments, like when they're throwing socks through the bedroom.**

Wennekes: You can set specific ac-

cents via the soundtrack; without the right sound even the most beautiful images lose their power. In those intimate moments, we zoom in on certain details that we emphasise in image and sound. A living room is usually an untidy place with a giant TV that is always on and that scatters a coloured light throughout the room. By isolating separate elements, you can still find beauty in ugly places.

### **Did certain elements remain under the radar due to your approach?**

Van den Brand: Sam's transgender theme. Which was a conscious choice. We wanted to stay close to Daan; we fought hard for that. We wanted to know how Daan felt about that change, but we avoided it as a major theme.

Wennekes: Initially, the focus of the film is on a bunch of boys growing up. The audience might go looking for an overarching theme, but for us this was precisely the essence: the major changes that we observe up close and through which we get to know Daan.

–  
Gert Hermans.