

## Mette Korsgaard about BRAVEHEARTS

“Filming in a place where you never know what will happen”

Luna (13), Aziz (16) Kayla and Laura (both 17) are courageous teenagers who found their way to Joanna House, Denmark’s only crisis centre for people under 18. Mette Korsgaard interviewed them about their childhood and life stories. They, who suffered mental illness, drug abuse or brutal violence from their parents, are the real BRAVEHEARTS.

According to the ‘World Happiness Report’, one of the highest European rates is scored in Denmark, where social support is provided through an excellent welfare system. Therefore it is even more so astonishing to find out about the many shortcomings in the system for children and young people under the age of 18, as portrayed in BRAVEHEARTS, a documentary by Mette Korsgaard. It is hard to believe that Joanna House in Copenhagen is the only crisis centre for minors in the country, a private home to which you can’t be appointed, but have to come on your own initiative with your parents’ consent, to stay for one or two weeks at most.

Mette Korsgaard: In many ways we have a great social welfare system, based on the idea that the right to help applies to anyone who needs it. For example, every person has the right to a place to live and to basic support. But the social system is challenged financially and set up so hierarchically that the person who needs help might never get to meet with the person who’ll decide about it. Over many years as a social worker, Jette Wilhelmsen – the founder of Joannahuset (Joanna House) – noticed this lack of help for young people being caught between their parents and the established system, which concentrated on the parents and didn’t trust the young. Seeing young people falling through the gaps in the system, Jette studied the situation in other countries and collected funds from private foundations and the government. In August 2020 she opened Joanna House, where some of the staff are getting paid while others – experienced social workers and lawyers – work as volunteers. On average one new child per day arrives in Joan-



na House to be placed in care, fleeing from violence or abuse.

### Are there so many young people looking for a safe place to stay?

Korsgaard: Every 5th child in Denmark has been exposed to physical violence, and every 4th child has been exposed to psychological violence from one or both parents. Over the first two years of its existence, Joanna House has counselled and/or offered shelter to 300 children. Not one gets rejected.

### You were following the project from the very beginning?

Korsgaard: I started filming the very moment the centre opened its doors. Over 18 months we collected about 150 hours of footage.

### What was the most challenging aspect of your work?

Korsgaard: At first the staff was rather suspicious about my intentions, which made it difficult for me to get closer to the children. After four months, I edited a short 10’ film to show them what I was up to. After that the atmosphere changed and everyone was very generous. Filming in a place where you never know



what might happen, requires a lot of patience. All the time you have to be prepared, because maybe today you get to make that one shot that will tell the entire story.

**And what would that story be about?**

Korsgaard: That we have to trust young people and pay our respect to them. And that basic human right applies to everyone; also to children.

These are heart-breaking stories about brave children who have to cope with psychological and physical violence. They fought for survival without appropriate support from the authorities. Kayla for example was placed with a foster family at the age of four; after that she changed families and orphanages several times until she was 16 and then lived on the street for several months. Aziz experienced how his father beat up his mother, his sister and him. When his parents got separated, his mother became violent too. When you see them reading their personal files, written from a strictly administrative perspective without any empathy for those affected, it cuts off your breath.

**How did the 'Bravehearts' and the authorities react to your film?**



Korsgaard: Luna, Kayla, Laura and Aziz were all very proud to be a part of this. After the film premiered in CphDox in March 2023 and was broadcast on one of Denmark's largest TV channels, debates erupted everywhere. The Danish prime minister went to visit Joanna House and spoke with the kids, which was a great chance for them to voice their opinion. Answering to their strongest request, the government decided to improve legislation in several ways. Now children can stay at Joanna House for two days without parents' permission (although parents will be informed about their stay). After two days parental permission is required. When a child is taken from their home, the

authorities are now obliged to closely investigate the child's siblings, and all decisions must be carefully explained. In general, thresholds have been lowered for children applying for help. Their calls will be taken seriously.

**How are Aziz, Luna, Kayla and Laura doing today?**

Korsgaard: All of them are living a hard life without parents taking care of them. But they are doing fine, having jobs or going to school. Kayla works at a travel agency, Laura has a job and started an education in the real estate business, Luna goes to primary school, and Aziz - who wants to become a craftsman - is attending a technical school.

**How does this film fit into your bigger career picture?**

Korsgaard: I'm a former social worker and journalist; for the last 15 years I have been working on books and documentaries. Recently I have finished a book and documentary in consultation with the academic world, investigating why people around the world grow thicker, while we all dream of losing weight. This project will premiere at CphDox in March. My signature project is a film about ageing - we've already been filming for six years and it will take another 19 years before we will be finished.

**What did you learn through BRAVE-HEARTS?**

Korsgaard: I learned to have trust in children. Listening to their stories, I sometimes thought they were exaggerating, but actually they were always very correct and precise. And I have become better at talking to people in general through better listening and less nurturing.

- Uta Beth