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New Documentary "My Child" Shows Turkish Families Loving Their LGBT Kids

Movies post by Oktay Ege Kozak on April 12, 2013 - 12:22pm; tagged documentary, LGBT, queer, transgender, Turkey.





It's a given that the Middle East has a long way to go as far as LGBT acceptance is concerned. Remember that sound byte of Ahmadinejad claiming that Iran doesn't have any homosexuals? Turkey is supposed to be the most secular and liberal Muslim country in the Middle East, yet its religious, right wing government still considers homosexuality to be a disease.

The emotional new Turkish documentary My Child successfully defends the idea that acceptance in any society begins with acceptance at home. Director Can Candan focuses on the parents of LGBT children, handing them a microphone to tell their stories. With minor differences, their journeys are all almost identical. First comes the self-blame ("What did we do wrong?"), then comes the desperation ("What can be done?") and then, for the families featuring in the film, comes acceptance.

But each family's story has its own unique power. After maxing out four credit cards on psychiatrists, the mother of a transgender child expresses the confusion she felt while teaching her biologically male child how to put on women's underwear. Later, the mom says she proudly held her daughter's hand to lead her through the part of security at school reserved for female students.

Another man reminisces on a conversation he had with his religious mother, who asked him if her transgender grandson's gender identity "came from God, and not through a bad experience during childhood?" When he told her that it did indeed come from God, the grandmother simply said, "If it's God's will, we can only accept it."

If an 82-year-old religious grandma from rural Turkey can accept her grandchild the way he is, what excuse do the rest of us have?

Candan's film is cleverly split into two parts. The first half consists of the parents telling their stories. It follows





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the Errol Morris school of filmmaking and places the camera directly in front of the parents' faces. This deceptively simple yet highly effective approach enables the audience to engage directly with the subjects. The second half adopts a fly-on-the-wall approach as we follow the parents to LGBT family support meetings and prepare to march with their flesh and blood at the Istanbul Pride Parade.

In one profound scene, a parent wrongfully states that his child decided to become gay at college. A psychiatrist devoted to educating the public on LGBT awareness simply explains, as if talking to a four-yearold, why sexual identity is not a choice. The speech is highly effective in its simplicity. It's easy for us in the liberal west to get on our high horses and proclaim that the facts presented in this quick biology lesson were already obvious to us, but unfortunately I can think of too many US Senators and policy makers who could benefit from such basic reasoning.

The film begins with a single parent sitting in front of a camera in a small room and ends with a glorious shot of Istiklal Street (perhaps the most popular part of Istanbul) full of thousands of LGBT people and their allies proudly exclaiming their support for existence through megaphones to the whole world. It successfully makes the point that even a single person's tolerance and acceptance can make a huge difference.

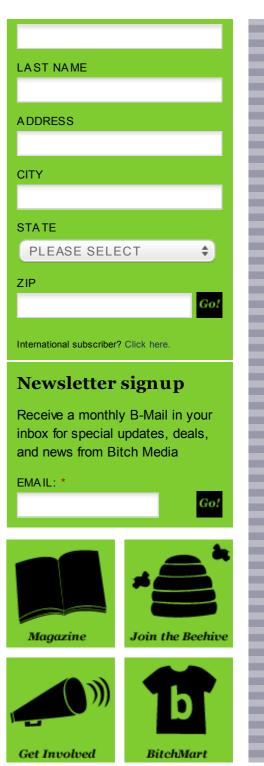
I got the chance to speak with director Can Candan about his film last month. Here is an abridged version of our long conversation.

OKTAY: The thing that affected me the most about the film was the importance of the first acceptance coming from the family when an LGBT person comes out of the closet. If it's accepted within the family, it makes it easier for the public to accept it. How did you get these parents to be involved with the film? Were they reluctant at first?

CAN CANDAN: No, they weren't at all. These are people who have already fully accepted their children as they are. They're at a point where they could share their stories with the world and proclaim that they are parents of LGBT children. I didn't have to convince them, they were ready anyway.

There's a scene in the film where a psychiatrist explains very simply how being LGBT is not a choice. Even though USA is becoming more accepting of this fact, there are still a lot of people here who could benefit from that explanation. Do you think the situation is the same in Turkey?

Of course. Some senators and people in power in Turkey still claim that homosexuality is a disease and can be cured. There's great ignorance. That's why we made sure that scene was in there. Some people said that the scene was too didactic. But I think people should still learn this fundamental piece of information. The public here has very little information on this issue, so there needed be some clear information delivered to them. There are many parents who just found out their child is LGBT. It's a shock for many parents to find out their child is LGBT. They might be scared because they were raised in a homophobic society, because of the harm



that might come upon their family, or simply because they're not informed. People are afraid of what they don't know. Giving them that information is very important and we wanted to show that in the film.

The Supreme Court in USA is about to rule on the legalization of gay marriage. What do you think Turkey can learn from USA as far as the fight for LGBT rights are concerned or vice versa?

Of course we're focused on changing the laws here. But as far as learning from the struggle in other countries, we like to show examples from them and be inspired. It gives us hope to see the change taking place. As far as what other countries can learn from Turkey, a film like this can break through some stereotypes. I lived in the States for 13 years and I know that there are some prejudices about Turkey. People don't usually know what's going on here. I think it's important that a film like this shows Turkey in a different light. It shows that there are different kinds of families who are working on changing things. Something interesting that I've seen is reversing some of the preconceived ideas that religious people are automatically conservative and anti-LGBT. I think it shows acceptance doesn't always go parallel with education level and religious faith. For example, religious grandparents in the film accept their transsexual grandchild according to their religious beliefs. At the same time, some upper class, more educated people who don't have any religious beliefs might have more trouble accepting their LGBT children as they are. That's interesting to me, and that can be a lesson that could come from the Turkish approach.

Unfortunately, My Child is not yet available in the US market, though it will be playing at the Montreal Film Festival. Director Candan urges those who wish to see the film to request it from their local film festivals and to check out the film's web site.

Photo: A still from the film shows a large pro-LGBT march in Turkey.





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