

PUSHING BOUNDARIES



GORDON DANIELS

Jules Roskam, an assistant professor of film and video production at Hampshire College, directed the film "Transparent."

Film, panel explore gender identity, parenthood

By SUZANNE WILSON
Staff Writer

Tonight, when Justin Cascio of Northampton watches himself on screen in a documentary titled "Transparent," he expects to be shocked by the image he'll see.

"I was a fat smoker," said Cascio, 36, who no longer smokes and isn't fat.

The segment, which was filmed close to eight years ago, recalls a complicated passage in his life.

Cascio is a transsexual male who, before he transitioned from female to male, gave birth to a son, now 17.

The film, which was directed by Jules Roskam, a visiting professor at Hampshire College in Amherst, is about the experiences of men like Cascio who struggled with their own sexual identities and their role as parents.

In it, they tell their stories of becoming parents and of deciding they could not live their lives as

women. They talk of the decision that would bring them face-to-face with myriad questions: How would their transition affect their children? What would it mean for family life? Could they change genders without losing their children? What does it mean to be a mother or a father?

Cascio is one of several local people who will participate in a panel discussion following the

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The documentary "Transparent" is about the experiences of men like Justin Cascio of Northampton who struggled with their sexual identities and their roles as parents.

Gender identity, parenthood explored in film

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transparent" will be shown in the Media Education Center Community Room, 100 Masonic St., Northampton. Admission is free.

"I've always been willing to share my experience," said Cascio — and to do so without feeling it's all been easy.

Cascio became a mother at age 20, left his marriage in 1995, and went through a tough divorce, eventually fighting in court to keep custody rights to see his son.

Cascio said his struggle with emotional difficulties forced him to give up his son to the care of his former husband.

At the time he was interviewed for the film, Cascio had not transitioned, a process he began in 1999.

Cascio wanted little or no contact with him during his early adolescence, Cascio said. "He was not my father," he said, and that was painful. He had to deal with his son when his son became disoriented toward the person he had been Mom.

Through give-and-take and tough negotiations, the two worked together, the two faced the challenge of forgiveness in their relationship. They now have a close touch, Cascio said, and he lives in Mississippi with his father, regularly visits his son.

Cascio had to grow a lot to do all this, Cascio said, "and I'm proud of the way he's able to do it for himself."

When he talked, he showed a vulnerability of the two of them in a photo taken last December in a booth at one of his son's favorite haunts in downtown Northampton. The photos show Cascio and child, sitting close together, looking relaxed and happy in his father's company.

"I think we have a good relationship now," he said. "And I'm proud more at peace," Cascio said.

Director's take

When Jules Rosskam, the director of "Transparent," it's not clear why Cascio and others interviewed for his film agreed to be interviewed.



GORDON DANIELS

Tynan Power of Northampton will take part in a panel discussion following tonight's screening of "Transparent."

"I think I'm a fairly disarming person," he said last week at his office. Friendly, open and engaging, Rosskam, 31, is an assistant professor of video/film production at Hampshire.

A 2001 graduate of Bennington College in Vermont, Rosskam initially planned to make painting his career focus. After moving to New York City after graduation, though, he became increasingly drawn to video production through work he did with Dyke TV, a nonprofit media arts organization.

Rosskam says it was "a long novella of an email" from a college friend he hadn't heard from in months that set him on the path of making "Transparent." The friend ended the email saying that within the next few years she wanted to become a parent and then transition from female to male.

Rosskam said he knew instantly he'd found his topic: "That's what I have to make a film about," he remembers thinking.

His interest was both professional and personal. He'd been thinking for a while about making a film, he said. Moreover, he'd also been thinking a lot about his own gender identity and questioning whether he wanted to continue living as a "queer woman," as he defined himself then. Added to that, he said, he was also thinking about whether he wanted to be a parent in the

future — eventually deciding, though, that he did not.

To find subjects for the film, Rosskam cast a wide net on the Internet — and waited.

As "a nobody" who had yet to make a movie and had no financial backing beyond his own money, Rosskam said he had no idea what to expect. When his inbox began filling up with responses — about 40 in all — he was ecstatic. Rosskam, who wanted his subjects to represent a geographic diversity, began contacting people and winnowing his search. In the end, he settled on 19 people in 14 different states and arranged to meet and film each one.

In February 2003, Rosskam and Anat Solomon, a colleague he'd met at Dyke TV who came aboard to help produce the film, hit the road in a car Rosskam borrowed from his parents. Over the next five weeks, Rosskam met and filmed his subjects, spending about two days with each person.

"Obviously, I thought I did," he said with a laugh when asked if he knew what he was doing. But it really was "a run and gun" operation, he said, on which he spent about \$7,000 of his own money.

After returning to New York, Rosskam spent bits and pieces of his spare time editing the 70 hours of material he'd gathered. To make ends meet, he was also

working at several part-time jobs doing freelance film work and "whatever I could do to pay the bills."

"Transparent," which was his first film, was completed in 2005. Since then, it has been shown at film festivals and conferences around the country and abroad, Rosskam said. Perhaps because it was the first film to explore its subject, it continues to find audiences, he said, at venues like tonight's Northampton event.

Rosskam, who also holds an MFA degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, will be on hand tonight to talk about his film. Despite its low-budget production, "Transparent" remains a film that he feels good about, Rosskam said. Since finishing it, he has gone on to make several more.

But making "Transparent" stayed with him in profound ways. In the end, he decided to transition to male, he said, "so that I could live more honestly and fully."

Same heart, same person

Also on the panel tonight will be Tynan Power, 40, of Northampton.

"There's an assumption that when you come out as trans, you're not going to have a normal life," Power said the other day. "That you won't have a job, or a spouse, or children." Power, for the record, writes for the Rainbow Times, a regional lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans publication, has two sons, ages 17 and 20, and a male partner.

Power said he was married twice to men before he transitioned; his two sons were born during those marriages.

"I always wanted to be a parent," he said. His first child was born when he was just 18. And he had also almost always known he did not feel right in the female body he was born in.

"From the time I was 5 or 6," he said, "I felt I should be a male." He remembers telling his mother that once. "She told me that was ridiculous. So I didn't talk about it very much after that." It was not until many years later, he said, that he even knew

there was a word for people like him who were born female but identified as male.

Power — like Justin Cascio — said his decision to transition involved a lot of soul-searching about how it would affect his sons. When people ask, as many have, if they ever considered that, Cascio and Power both said essentially the same thing: Yes. Emphatically. Almost obsessively.

"That was all I thought about for years," Power said. "I needed to know they were OK with it. His sons had met others who had transitioned, he said, so it wasn't completely unknown. "They knew it wasn't something that everybody did, but they knew it was something that some people did."

Power began his transition when his sons were 8 and 5.

"My older son had a more difficult time," Power said. "He had more recollection of me as someone's wife." It took time for him to believe that his mother — "and I embrace that word," Power said — was still going to be the same person, with the same heart and the same personal qualities.

For his younger son, Power said, the transition itself was not such a dramatic change. The harder time for him came later in middle school, Power said, when he had to learn to deal with prying questions from his friends. "He was called upon to explain my choices," said Power. "And that's not his job."

Power's oldest son, now in college in North Carolina, has become a strong supporter of LGBT issues, Power said. His younger son is a student at Northampton High School.

"I've always listened. We've always talked," Power said when asked how he stayed connected to his kids.

Listening, talking — and doing the stuff that parents do. "At 11:30 at night, I'm going out to get another gallon of milk if we're out because he drank it all and we need it for the morning. In the morning, I get up and get him off to school. There's nothing particularly scandalous about my lifestyle."