

POSSIBLE SELVES

A FEATURE-LENGTH DOCUMENTARY ABOUT
GROWING UP IN FOSTER CARE

A Film by Shaun Kadlec

Press Kit

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Logline

Possible Selves follows Alex and Mia, two teenagers in foster care, as they pursue college dreams while struggling with lives torn between biological and foster families.

Synopsis

We meet Alex as a sophomore in high school. He has just moved in with a new foster family and is exploring his relationship with them. He has been in many foster families over the years and knows that each time he moves, he has to learn a new set of rules and norms in order to fit in. This foster family is supportive and caring and seems to be a great match for him.

Alex is part of the First Star Bruin Guardian Scholars Academy, a program based at UCLA that helps high school students in foster care prepare for college. We follow Alex to a summer session of this program where we meet several of his fellow students. Throughout the film, we get glimpses into these students' lives. These include Justin, a young poet who helps Alex come to terms with his family history; Selvin and DeAndre, who support each other in processing their experience in the juvenile justice system; Karly, who reveals the lasting impact of trauma; and Tiffany and Andrea, who help each other overcome the stigma and shame carried by many in the child welfare system.

Alyssa, another First Star student, lives at the Dangerfield Group Home where Ms. Crystal, an unconditionally loving but tough caregiver, becomes a recurring participant in the film. These windows into different realities of foster care create a mosaic that reveals many of the obstacles that foster youth face—and sheds light on why homelessness, unemployment, incarceration and dropping out of school are so common among foster youth.

As Alex's story continues, we see him as a dedicated member of his high school band, which is a second family to him. He plays several brass instruments, performs at his high school's homecoming game, and then has a tense visit with his biological grandmother. We learn that Alex was removed from his biological mother's care when he was seven and placed with his grandmother. Conflict with his grandmother's abusive boyfriend caused Alex to be removed from her care and placed with strangers. His mother was also in foster care when she was young. As Alex says, he is a second generation foster youth.

As we reach senior year of high school, we meet Mia, a foster youth who has survived severe trauma and abuse and is now with a supportive and loving foster family. She loves to dance and sing and hopes to study biology in college. As Mia graduates from high school and prepares to leave for college, Alex's journey takes a sudden turn: his foster family kicks him out, and he delays starting college while he finds a new home.

Alex's foster family says that he was using alcohol and marijuana and being disrespectful; Alex denies this. While it is impossible to know exactly what happened between them, the sudden change sends Alex into a period of depression and weight gain, and he begins spending more time with his biological family. He gets several tattoos from his grandmother's boyfriend, the man who caused him to go into foster care in the first place. Seeing Alex being marked by the man who both cared for him and abused him brings to life the power of family to nurture and to traumatize—often at the same time.

While Alex's future looks uncertain, Mia's foster parents drop her off at San Francisco State University, and after an emotional farewell, she reconnects with Bajing, her best friend from First Star. The two are disoriented by suddenly being on their own, but they face the future together, supporting each other as chosen family.

After a few more months on his own, Alex enters a transitional housing program where he finds more stability. As he gets back on his feet, he enrolls at Mt. San Antonio College to study music. Still recovering from the recent upheavals in his life, he goes to his first day of class. Alone but undaunted, his future feels balanced on a knife's edge: he has achieved the milestone of beginning higher education, but his support system feels dangerously thin. During the closing shots we feel that it is possible for him to succeed, but that the structure of the foster care system has stacked the odds against him.

Several times during the film, Alex texts the filmmaker links to videos that provide context about the foster care system. We view these on the filmmaker's phone, and they include Alex's education attorney (Paige Chan Fern), the judge who gave permission to film with Alex (Judge Michael Nash), and a professor who studies how people imagine and pursue the possible selves that they might become (Dr. Daphna Oyserman). While the obstacles to success that the teenagers in *Possible Selves* face are extreme, their resilience paired with the love and support of caring adults may make it possible for them to become the adults they dream of being.



Director's Statement

The day I met the teenagers at the First Star Academy at UCLA, a college prep program for teens in foster care, I felt a closeness and resonance with them that I could not explain. As foster youth, they had survived or were living through extreme traumas of abuse, neglect and separation from loved ones—yet they were bright, wise, strong, and sparkling with creativity and curiosity. How could they be so vibrant while experiencing so much pain, and what was it about this seeming contradiction that connected with me so deeply?

We hear about foster youth in the media when something tragic happens, but their personal stories and perspectives are hidden behind a judicial barrier: the state is their legal guardian, so a judge must give permission for foster youth to be filmed or recorded. As education attorney Paige Chan Fern says in *Possible Selves*, they are the only marginalized group in the United States that isn't allowed to speak out on their own behalf.

In the spring of 2014, something remarkable happened: Judge Michael Nash, an advocate for greater transparency in the child welfare system, gave permission for the whole group of First Star students to be filmed. The kids were ready to tell their stories, and I, having just finished a film about the LGBTQ+ community in Cameroon, was ready to be a part of it.

Filmed in an observational style that did not hide my presence as a filmmaker, I let the participants tell their own stories as much as possible while also acknowledging that I was observing and mediating. The editing, helmed by Grace Zahrah, immerses the viewer in the world of the participants and follows the unpredictable flow of life in foster care without forcing the stories into unrealistically neat resolutions.

I spent a month filming at First Star's yearly summer camp on the UCLA campus. After that, I followed several of the teens into their lives beyond the program. As I got to know their stories better, my own story took an unexpected turn.

I started having anxiety in my late twenties, and it gradually increased in severity throughout my early thirties until I finally started therapy, just as I began filming *Possible Selves*. I wanted a quick fix, but my therapist insisted that we look into the deeper causes. In the biography I had constructed for myself, my childhood was normal, happy, average—perhaps a bit colorful, I told myself. But as we delved into the realities of my past, I realized that I had been in denial about a huge amount of trauma and suffering that shaped the ways I experience the world.

It somehow didn't seem strange to me that my mother had to sneak us both out my bedroom window to escape my father's alcoholic rage, sleeping in the car at a nearby campground, and that this kind of thing happened again and again. I had also decided that it wasn't a big deal that my father got sick and couldn't work for months when I was in seventh grade, and we ran out of money and went on welfare. I had likewise downplayed my experience coming out as gay in the mid 90s: being told by my family, and the culture around me, that I was sick and shameful.



After all, outwardly I had succeeded. I had made it out of poverty, and instead of turning to drugs or crime to escape the pain, as my brother had, I poured myself into school, art, and overachievement. In high school I devoured modernist and Beat writers and published stream-of-consciousness rhapsodies in the school literary journal. I did music and theater. I got a full scholarship to college, the first in my family, and studied abroad in Sri Lanka—where I discovered documentary filmmaking.

Though these were constructive activities, I was using them to run away from the pain and fear and shame that I had not processed and was afraid to face. I was still caught neurologically in the cycle of trauma. Reading Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* helped me make sense of much of what I was experiencing. His research suggests that trauma causes the mind to interpret safety and danger inaccurately. To oversimplify, many people who have experienced trauma don't feel safe even when no danger is present. It becomes hard to trust, hard to relax, hard to believe in yourself when other people, the future, and the world at large seem like threats.

I believe this is what I recognized in the kids at First Star that resonated so strongly with me. We were the high-functioning traumatized: pouring true passion into our work and studies while dealing with, or avoiding, a deep well of pain and trauma. Fortunately, the kids at First Star have therapists and are facing these issues head on at an early age. As I began to understand these issues better, the students and I talked about them openly, and these conversations helped me in my own healing journey.

That journey continues today. I now have a very good relationship with my parents and better understand that my dad was battling PTSD, depression, learning disabilities—all undiagnosed and untreated. I understand better how these burdens are unintentionally passed from parents to children and perpetuate cycles of generational poverty.

And these cycles can be broken. Individuals and organizations who bring love and care into the lives of young people facing adversity, who show them that there are other ways to be, have the power to change the course of their lives. Telling our stories and overcoming shame helps us heal. My intention is that participating in *Possible Selves* gives these teenagers an opportunity to develop their voices, to own their stories, and instead of hiding as I did at their age, to let the world connect with their beautiful, creative, resilient, powerful selves.

Topic Background

Foster Care

Approximately 440,000 children are currently in foster care in the United States. About 60,000 live in California, the highest of any state. 33,000 of those are in Los Angeles County.

When children enter foster care, governmental or social service agencies place them in temporary homes because of concerns for their safety. The system is highly decentralized and is administered primarily at the county level. Temporary homes can be with relatives (kinship care), in group homes, with individual foster families and sometimes in shelters or other institutions. Most youth enter the system because of abuse or neglect, usually the result of parents with substance abuse issues and/or untreated mental illness. It is almost never the fault of the child.

After ensuring children's safety, the primary goal of foster care is to reunite them with their families. Interventions such as counseling, parenting classes, and addiction treatment are used. If these are not successful, a parent's rights may be permanently terminated, and the child will stay in foster care until they are adopted or "age out" of the system. The older the child, the less likely that they will be adopted before reaching adulthood.

Trauma

It is extremely likely that children who are abused or neglected will experience trauma. If they haven't, then being removed from their families and placed with strangers will be traumatic in and of itself.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk, a leading researcher in the complex field of trauma psychology, writes, "Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves."

Van der Kolk also notes that people who have experienced trauma often become extremely sensitive to perceived threats, and so react more strongly than is appropriate. A traumatized child being reprimanded by a teacher may feel like they are literally being attacked by a wild animal, triggering an instinctual fight/flight/freeze response. The child may act out, try to get away, or shut down and dissociate from their feelings. Many behavior "problems" are related to underlying trauma.

Trauma is treatable, and advances are being made rapidly in the field.

Instability

In the state of California, if a foster family requests that a foster child in their care be removed from their home, the child must be gone within 14 days. No reason for the removal needs to be given. The psychological instability that this creates is extremely difficult for foster children. If children are unable to form secure attachments with their caregivers, they will likely not feel safe and cared for, and studies show that they will be more likely to struggle with anxiety and depression in the future.

When children in foster care move homes, they often need to change schools, which causes them to fall behind. They also have to make new friends and join new sports teams and extra-curricular activities. According to the California Department of Education, the on-time graduation rate for foster youth in the 2019-2020 school year was 58% compared to 85% overall statewide.

Homelessness and Incarceration

Former foster youth experience much higher rates of homelessness and incarceration than the general public. Studies vary in the numbers they report, but in all cases the rates for foster youth are much higher than for the population overall. A study conducted by Casey Family Programs/Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago contains the following troubling statistics about children who reach adulthood while in foster care. By the time they turn 25:

- 25% will experience homelessness
- 24% will be employed
- 64% of men and 32% of women will have been incarcerated

LGBTQ+ youth, facing additional discrimination, are especially vulnerable to homelessness and are less likely to be adopted or reunited with their families.

The California Children's Law Center collects statistics on foster youth, and First Star (featured in *Possible Selves*), has also compiled a great deal of research on these issues.

Love and Consistent Care

While the child welfare system needs structural reform, one of the most attainable ways to change outcomes now is to provide consistent and reliable support and love to youth in foster care. This could mean becoming a mentor, a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate), a foster parent, or contributing financially to the many organizations that provide services and support to foster youth.

"If your parents' faces never lit up when they looked at you, it's hard to know what it feels like to be loved and cherished. If you come from an incomprehensible world filled with secrecy and fear, it's almost impossible to find the words to express what you have endured. If you grew up unwanted and ignored, it is a major challenge to develop a visceral sense of agency and self-worth." (Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*).

Creative Team



Shaun Kadlec – Director and Producer

Shaun's first feature-length documentary, *Born This Way*, premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival and won awards around the world for its powerful yet intimate depiction of the LGBTQ+ community in Cameroon.

Shaun grew up between small towns in Central California and rural Alabama. A lanky gay kid in a conservative home, he was the first in his family to go to college and studied experimental music at Carleton College. As a Fulbright Scholar in Sri Lanka during the country's civil war, he studied the power of storytelling to transform conflict.

While creating commercials and branded content, Shaun has worked around the world with clients including General Electric, The Courage Campaign, People for the American Way and Partners in Health. He currently lives in Los Angeles.



Grace Zahrah – Editor and Producer

Grace is a Lebanese-American artist, woodworker and documentary editor. The first feature documentary that she edited, *Copwatch*, was nominated for best documentary at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2017. Her latest film, *Sirens* (about Lebanon's only all-female thrash metal band), premieres at Sundance in 2022. A graduate of Carleton College, Grace spent her undergraduate years making short documentaries in Lebanon and Jordan.



Jamie Wolf – Executive Producer

Jamie Wolf is a journalist, editor and photographer whose primary occupation currently is executive producing documentary films. Her recent credits as EP include *Bring Your Own Brigade*, *Cusp*, *The Great Hack*, *Kingmaker*, *The Truffle Hunters*, and *Newtown*.



Bill Resnick – Executive Producer

Bill Resnick, MD, MBA, is a psychiatrist and philanthropist, as well as a Certified Mindfulness Teacher. He currently chairs the board of InsightLA and also serves on the boards of Awakening Recovery and American Jewish World Service, and on the advisory board of UCLA's Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital.

Sarah Feeley – Producer

Sarah Feeley is an award-winning filmmaker and artist whose work focuses on themes of identity and belonging. She directed the season finale of Netflix's *The Playbook* as well as *Raising Ryland* for CNN Films, which takes viewers on a gripping journey inside the transgender experience as lived by a five-year-old boy and his two loving parents. Sarah has also produced widely in the documentary and commercial worlds.

Pablo Bryant – Cinematographer

Pablo has been the director of photography for four feature documentaries, including his directorial debut *Mr. Fish: Cartooning from the Deep End*. His camera work can also be seen in HBO's *Cinema Verité*, the documentary *The Vanishing of the Bees* (narrated by Elliot Page), and many other film and television projects.

Theo Popov – Composer

Theo is a composer of music for the theater stage and film screen. His operas – which include two commissions by the American Lyric Theater – have received multiple productions and awards across the United States. In addition, he has written musicals, choral and orchestral pieces, art songs, and chamber and electronic music. He is a graduate of Princeton University.

Doug Blush – Consulting Editor

Doug Blush is an award-winning director, producer, editor, writer and cinematographer whose work includes over 130 feature and television projects, and is a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) as well as American Cinema Editors (ACE). His recent credits include, as consulting editor and co-producer, the 2020 Critics' Choice Award winning *Mr Soul!*, the 2019 Academy Award winning *Period. End of Sentence*, the 2018 Academy Award winning *Icarus*, and, as supervising editor, the 2013 Oscar winner *20 Feet from Stardom*, for which he also received the ACE Eddie Award for Best Documentary Editing.

Keith Ochwat – Distribution Strategist

Over his 12 year career as a documentary filmmaker, Keith Ochwat has produced three nationally broadcast PBS films. In addition to producing, Keith has developed and executed successful film distribution and audience engagement campaigns. Keith now consults with filmmakers and is the founder of Show&Tell, a virtual screening and educational platform for filmmakers.

