

# 'Little Miss Westie' tells of West Haven family with 2 transgender kids

JOE AMARANTE JUNE 12, 2020



Ren poses while trying on dresses for West Haven pageant.

“Little Miss Westie” isn’t just a pageant for young girls in West Haven; it’s also an intriguing documentary about a city family with two transgender siblings.

The Joy E. Reed and Dan Hunt film follows siblings Luca and Ren and their supportive parents, Shelley Stoehr-McCarthy and Chris McCarthy, as they deal with transgender issues and growing up. It was filmed four years ago when son Luca (19 now) was 15 and daughter Ren (14) was 10.

The two youths navigate school, puberty, friendships and transitioning.

Young Ren begins dressing full-time as a female and has a puberty blocker surgically implanted, and older sibling Luca primarily dresses as a male but prefers a more gender-fluid style and has begun testosterone treatment.



1of4Luca, left, Ren and their mother Shelley in the car.Photo: Owen Strock / Contributed photo



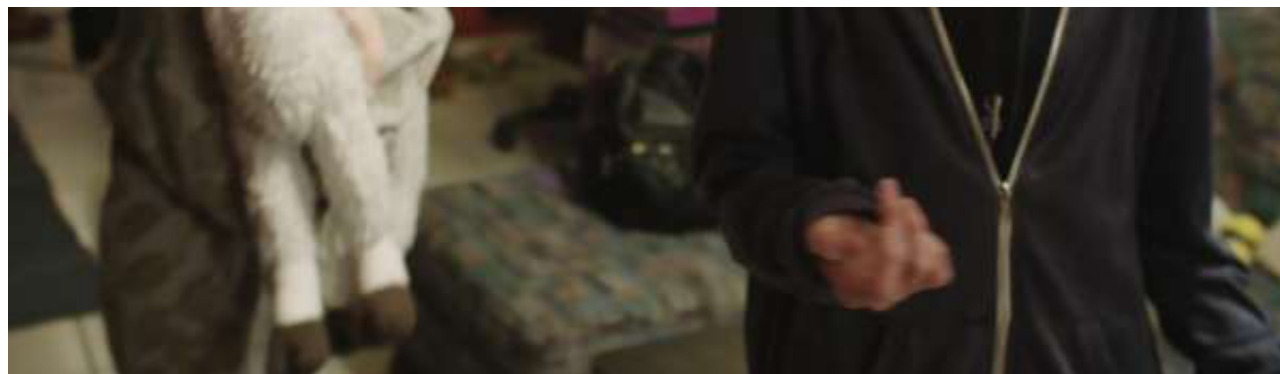


2of4 "Little Miss Westie" filmmakers Joy E. Reed and Dan Hunt. Photo: Dan Hunt / Contributed photo



3of4 Luca takes pictures of Ren with phone. Photo: Dan Hunt / Contributed photo





4of4Ren, left, and Luca in the documentary "Little Miss Westie."Photo: Rob Featherstone / Contributed photo

“Little Miss Westie” premieres on [WORLD Channel](#) Tuesday, June 16, at 8 p.m. during his LGBTQ+ Pride Month and on [worldchannel.org](#) as part of its “America ReFramed” series. (It’s also on certain PBS stations Tuesday, namely WGBY in Springfield, Mass., and streaming platforms such as [amdoc.org](#) and [PBS.org](#).)

Co-director Hunt, a New York professor and maker of several “queer-themed documentaries,” said he learned of the family from a mutual friend, who mentioned that the backdrop of the story was this Little Miss Westie pageant and that Ren was planning on participating as a coming-out girl.

“And even more interesting than that was coaching her was her older brother Luca, who participated about six years before when he was living as a girl,” Hunt said, “which kind of made my mind blow up a little bit.”

Hunt was thinking of a short film, but when he met with the parents, who thoroughly vetted him, “I fell in love with this family. The kids are remarkable, they’re very smart, super creative. The parents are like the most

amazing parents I've ever met in my life.”

He reached out to previous collaborator Reed and after several visits she pointed out that there was more here than a short; the project blossomed into a 75-minute film that has been shown at film festivals and dubbed in other languages for Taiwan, Italy and Mexico.

“Just the gender dynamics alone are complex ... and family dynamics are complex,” said Hunt. “And then you add in these other elements, like Trump getting elected and this beauty pageant and school and dating and puberty.”

For the parents, having one child switch genders was one thing, but two was another level.

“We were worried that people would think that Ren was just copying Luca,” said mom Stoehr-McCarthy in a phone chat, “and we did actually meet with that (notion) from some family members — that kind of prejudice, that maybe Luca had somehow influenced Ren. But as it turns out, Ren had come out a few years before to Luca.”

Their home was an “open-enough environment,” Chris McCarthy said, and it helped that Luca had done his homework about the transition via online information.

It also helped the family to attend a Family Fun Weekend in Groton for

families with similar situations.

“That made a difference because we saw a lot of other families who had more than one child who was gender nonconforming,” Stoehr-McCarthy said.

The documentary refers a few times to the changing social climate brought on by the election of Donald Trump and how his administration might make changes to laws protecting the transgender community.

“There was an initial fear that ... the Trump administration was opposed to transgender people and really the LGBTQ issues, so the community ... that we talked to was very frightened at first,” said Stoehr-McCarthy. “We just had no idea which way it was going to go, and were they just going to (make it impossible) for our kids to get their federal documents? Not just passports but any federal documents (with their preferred gender ID).”

Students from Quinnipiac University, officials from New Haven Public Health and Yale’s Gender Program helped with those and other issues, as seen in the film.

Of the Yale program, Stoehr-McCarthy said, “They’re really amazing. Both kids love their doctors there. ... And I felt comfortable because a lot of the worries I had, like ‘what if they de-transition and then they blame me later?’ ... kind of went away by the fact that at Yale, they had a whole team of

psychiatrists and many, many hours of psych testing and medical testings and doctors.”

When the Yale team confirmed what the children had been saying to their parents, it was reassuring to Shelley and Chris — particularly when it came to addressing physical issues such as taking or blocking hormones.

Stoehr-McCarthy, an instructor at Southern Connecticut State University (where the film was shown in 2018), said societal acceptance is not a top personal goal for her. “It’s become less important to me that everyone accept them, as long as nobody’s doing harm (to them). ... You don’t have to be gung-ho about my kids’ gender, whether it be cisgender (assigned at birth) or transgender.”

Today the transgender siblings are doing well, the parents said, with Luca on a scholarship at Bard College and Ren in a therapeutic high school.

Asked what viewers should take away from the film, Stoehr-McCarthy said, “I like that the film really shows that our family is not different than other families. We have this one other thing, but other than that, we’re doing the same thing that our neighbors are doing in West Haven.”

Both parents said the city schools were great to them. “The schools were extremely supportive, and we know there are other towns where they’re not as supportive, from the eyes of other parents.” For Ren’s needs, she said, Carrigan Intermediate School “mobilized, from the first day I called them.”

Reed, asked about reactions to the film at showings, said, “There’s almost always a trans person in the audience who raises their hand and says, ‘I wish Chris and Shelley had been my parents.’”

Hunt said the film can have a positive effect for people who don’t understand such gender choices, and for kids finding a comfortable identity.

“We hope that people watching this will be more sensitive to (issues) around gender, but also around just family dynamics and watching a kid come into themselves,” Hunt said. “And listening to a kid and what the child has to say about themselves. And believing them.”

Reed added, “I think a lot of the fear comes from not understanding. So educating yourself, you can alleviate those fears. Because being trans is just one tiny facet of who these who, beautiful, complicated kids are.”

Hunt said the West Haven family lives “in a very special area” where there’s an LGBTQ+ support group, where Yale New Haven Hospital “is doing extraordinary things” and the school system is responsive.


Reed said understanding is key. “That’s where things like the bathroom bill come in. We fear what we don’t understand, so things like (that) are rooted in fear. In reality, trans people are more at risk in a bathroom than cisgender people. ... If people just had a better understanding of the big picture of what it’s like to be trans, I don’t think we would have those issues.”



[jamarante@nhregister.com](mailto:jamarante@nhregister.com); [@Joeammo](#) on Twitter

<https://outline.com/URjG3X>

[COPY](#)

 [Annotations](#)

[Report a problem](#)

Outline is a free service for reading and annotating news articles. We remove the clutter so you can analyze and comment on the content. In today's climate of widespread misinformation, Outline empowers readers to verify the facts.

[HOME](#) · [TERMS](#) · [PRIVACY](#) · [DMCA](#) · [CONTACT](#)