

# I AM STILL YOUR CHILD

## COMMUNITY SCREENING DISCUSSION GUIDE



# I AM STILL YOUR CHILD

2017 | Documentary | Canada | 45 minutes  
Original English Version

Written and Directed by Megan Durnford  
Produced by Katarina Soukup, Catbird Films



## ABOUT THE FILM

Jessy, Sarah and Von are all familiar with the "ups and downs" of living with a parent who suffers from mental illness. This situation is extremely common (60% of Canadians with mental illness are parents) and there can be serious long-term repercussions. *I Am Still Your Child* immerses us in a bewildering, yet hopeful, world through the stories of three compelling subjects who have found ways to cope—and even thrive!

## STREAM THE FULL FILM

ON THE CBC PLAYER (CANADA ONLY) → <http://bit.ly/2xc1aR2>

OFFICIAL WEBSITE → [iamstillyourchild.com](http://iamstillyourchild.com)

OFFICIAL TRAILER → <http://bit.ly/2j35IE5>

# PARTICIPANTS

## SARAH



Sarah and her father Andy have a lot in common; they both enjoy history, literature and walking the family dogs. Also, they both suffer from mental health difficulties. Andy struggles with bipolar disorder. Sarah, who has grown up in a tumultuous environment due to her father's illness, suffers from chronic anxiety. Sarah has developed a variety of coping methods including; listening to music, praying and 'hanging out' with her friends.

## JESSY



For sixteen years, Jessy had an idyllic life. Then, suddenly, her mother—a dynamic woman who effortlessly balanced art therapy with tending to her family—developed severe mental illness. She watched in horror as her mother's months-long depression gave way to a new phase that was a little “too” happy. She initially had an extremely hard time coping with her mother's illness. Now Jessy enjoys honing her painting and drawing skills as well as learning about the healing power of art.

## VON



Von is a methodical, self-taught comic artist. He learned how to be resourceful at a very young age because his mother, who suffered from schizophrenia, was not always available to help him. He never doubted his mother's love, yet he was frequently frustrated, and sometimes even scared, by manifestations of her illness. Years later, Von taught himself how to draw so that he could create a graphic novel inspired by his childhood experience.

# ABOUT THE ISSUE & THE CAMPAIGN

More than half a million of Canada's frontline mental healthcare “workers” are less than twelve years old.

They're called COPMI – Children Of a Parent with Mental Illness – and there are 575 000 of them in Canada; one in ten kids under 12 years of age.

*I Am Still Your Child* explores the point of view of growing up with a mentally ill parent through the intimate and touching stories of Sarah, Jessy and Von, but their experiences speak to a much wider issue. Children who grow up with a parent who has mental health difficulties are at risk for a host of grave repercussions, including a much higher risk of developing mental illness themselves and reproducing a potentially toxic pattern. These children are vulnerable to life-long disability and yet they are virtually invisible to our healthcare system. Our goal is to shed light on a public health ticking time bomb and help break the isolation in which children of a parent with a mental illness often live.

From fundraising campaigns to edgy television dramas, and from the news to the realities of our family lives, Canadians have had ample opportunity to learn about the struggles of people living with mental health challenges. Few of us remain untouched. But some are shouldering a disproportionate share of the burden. They're hard to see or hear. Indeed, they're often unaware that their reality can be improved. Yet the more than half a million Canadian children who grow up with a parent who has mental health challenges are teaching us a lot about resilience and character development in the face of adversity.

Growing up with a mentally ill parent inspires a heavy mix of anguish, tolerance, worry, and affection. It can be a lonely experience fraught with stigma. COPMI children juggle chronic anxiety, isolation, low self-esteem, inappropriate household responsibilities, and interrupted education. At the extreme, parental mental illness has been linked to a higher risk of severe child abuse. Associated parenting and family dysfunction make COPMIs two to three times more likely to develop a mental health problem themselves. Yet there is little awareness of the adversity this voiceless mass is experiencing and few resources to provide support and information for them.

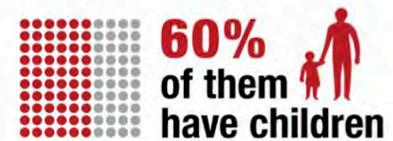
But there is light at the end of the tunnel! Studies show that when they are supported and given information about their parents' condition, COPMI children have a good chance of successfully navigating into adulthood. Provided with specific psychosocial tools, the risk of trans-generational transmission of mental illness is considerably reduced. We can help break the cycle by helping COPMI children - and their stories - see the light and by guiding them towards much needed resources.

**Thankfully, shining a light on and explaining issues is what documentary does best. The impact campaign supporting *I Am Still Your Child* is designed to increase awareness of the issue and provide tools for adults and kids to better recognize the situation and find support. Our website is loaded with a ton of shareable content including firsthand stories (posters, videos, memes), a DIY community screening kit, infographics, and mental health resources.**

**To join the campaign, connect with us on social media then share our content using the campaign hashtag #IamStillYourChild**

# WHY THIS FILM? WHY NOW?

- 1 in 10 Canadian children under the age of 12 is growing up with a parent who suffers from a mental illness.
- The majority of men (57%) & women (68%) with mental illness during their lifetime, are parents.
- Children of parents suffering from mental illness have a 30-40% increased likelihood to develop mental illness.
- These children are at risk for a host of grave repercussions, including: chronic anxiety, isolation, low self-esteem, inappropriate household responsibilities and interrupted education. They are also vulnerable to lifelong disability and yet (unless they are also diagnosed with a mental illness) they are virtually invisible to our healthcare system.
- When these children have opportunities to learn more about their parent's condition, to express conflicted feelings, to meet their peers, to discover stress management strategies, to develop positive self-esteem and to acknowledge that they are absolutely entitled to seek happiness (despite their parents' condition) they can learn to cope — and even thrive.
- The most sophisticated programs designed to assist children who are growing up with parental mental illness, are in Australia and England. In Canada, most existing support comes from small, self-funded organizations that are scattered across the country. These organizations struggle to survive and maintain their activities. Outside of urban areas, resources are scarce.
- This social concern is still at its infancy in Canada. However there are several encouraging signs that this issue is starting to garner attention. For instance, according to the Plan d'Action en Santé Mentale 2015-2020, a Ministry of Health and Social Services policy plan, the Quebec government recognizes that children of parents who are suffering from mental illness are at risk for developing their own mental health issues and that these vulnerable young Quebecers are in need of specialized support.





HAVE A  
PARENT WITH  
**MENTAL  
ILLNESS?**  
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**STILL**  
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VON  
ALLAN

# ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

## MEGAN DURNFORD



A born storyteller, Megan Durnford, the writer/director of *I Am Still Your Child*, is based in Montreal. After 15 years of writing for newspapers, multimedia projects and non-fiction books, Megan made her first foray into documentary film with *Just A Lawn* (2007) a short documentary about the dark side of “perfect” lawns. This film has been presented at 14 international film festivals. In 2011, Megan directed *Une brique à la fois*, an affectionate portrayal of four Quebec adult LEGO builders. This 45 minute documentary was nominated for a Golden Sheaf Award (Documentary Arts/Culture) at the Yorkton Film Festival. It has been broadcast on Canal D in Quebec. Megan has studied documentary film at the Summer Institute of Film and Television in Ottawa and at IDFAcademy in Amsterdam.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

I first heard about the issue of parental mental illness via TEDxYouth@Montreal. A guest speaker, Julie, explained how her life was thrown into turmoil during her teenage years when her mother fell into a severe depression. Julie recounted that she felt very insecure, her self-esteem plummeted and she had trouble concentrating on schoolwork. She felt that healthcare professionals and family members were so preoccupied with helping her mother that they completely overlooked the impact of this situation on her life.

I was both moved and intrigued. I had never heard of this aspect of mental health. So I decided to do some research to see whether Julie's story was representative of Canadian youth who are living with the impact of parental mental illness. Once I began to speak with academics, mental health counsellors and social workers, I discovered that this is, indeed, a very common situation.

I learned that 10% of Canadian children under 12 are growing up with a parent who has a mental illness. These children are at risk for a host of grave repercussions, including chronic anxiety, isolation, low self-esteem, in- appropriate household responsibilities and interrupted education.

I tried to imagine what it would be like for a child to grow up in a situation in which their parents are simultaneously the prime source of security—and the prime source of stress!

I wondered do these children feel responsible for taking care of their ill parent? Do they feel resentful that their parent is not "there" for them? What kind of assistance do they really need from family members, teachers and other adults in their environment? Do adults sometimes wrongly assume that they know how to help? How come some individuals manage to grow up seemingly unscathed by their confounding childhood and yet others need regular psychological support in order to cope? How will this adverse experience shape their future decisions about employment, family relationships and their own ability to parent? How does this situation impact our society?

When I began to meet young people who were living with parental mental illness, I assumed that I would only hear morose stories; stories about children who are perpetually confused by their parent's behaviour and children who are afraid of their parents. Of course, I did hear numerous stories about sad, and sometimes traumatic, events. However I was amazed to discover that there are also a lot of positive stories. For instance, some children feel empowered by their caring role. And some parents and children feel that the challenge of mental illness has brought them closer. Ultimately, I've learned that having a parent with a mental illness means learning to live with contradictory feelings and learning how to quickly adapt to new situations.

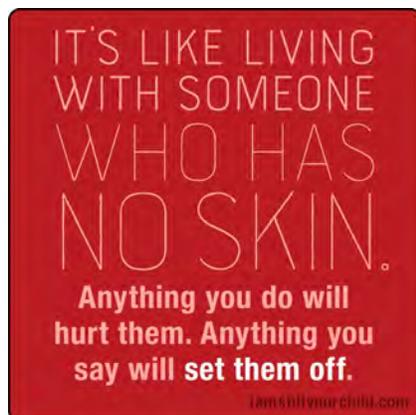
Growing up with a mentally ill parent is a very lonely experience. Most of these children are quite isolated and they do not have many opportunities to express how they feel and what they need. Often, the ill parent is the only caregiver. Even when both parents are present, the healthy parent is often preoccupied with their own grief. Also, despite mass media campaigns, mental illness is still stigmatized. Consequently, these children are often reluctant to share information about their home life with schoolmates, friends, teachers and other family members.

My intention with *I Am Still Your Child* was to enter this hidden world via the daily lives of Sarah and Jessy. Due to privileged access and generosity on their part, I was able to follow the girls during a range of experiences; we will see how they interact with their ill parent and how they interact with their peers. In addition, to Sarah and Jessy, we meet Von Allan, an artist who illustrated his fictionalized childhood experiences of parental illness in the graphic novel *the road to god knows...*

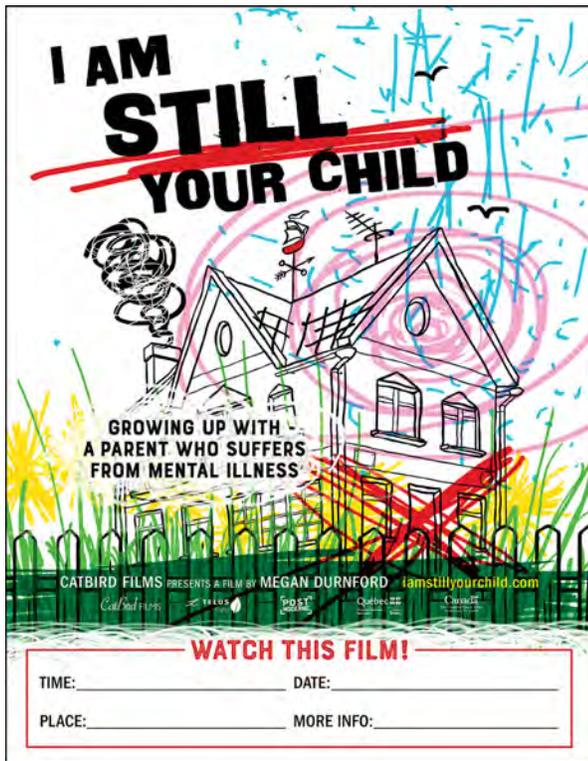
Academic researchers around the world have documented and analyzed these children's lives. I wanted to allow the children to speak for themselves. I wanted to let them tell us how they manage in the present tense and how they are preparing for their future lives. What is it really like to grow up with a parent who suffers from mental illness? What are their real needs, hopes and desires?

I do not have any personal experience regarding parental mental illness. However I do have two teenage children. Considering how difficult it is for most teenagers to deal with the demands of early adulthood, I can only imagine how much more difficult it is for these children.

By enabling viewers to follow Sarah, Jessy, and Von on their respective emotional journeys, I hope to stimulate a lively debate about this critical social issue. Are Canadian children who are growing up with parents suffering from mental illness adequately supported? What are the current resources? Who has access? What do we, as a society, owe to these children?



# PROMOTE YOUR SCREENING



- Download and print the film **Poster** on [iamstillyourchild.com/the-issue/diy-screenings](http://iamstillyourchild.com/the-issue/diy-screenings). It has room for you to add the date, time and venue of your screening.
- Download our **Social Media Tips** and use the hashtag #iamstillyourchild when promoting your screening on social media
- Finally, let us know about your screening by sending an email to [iamstillyourchild@catbirdproductions.ca](mailto:iamstillyourchild@catbirdproductions.ca) so we can promote it too!

# SET UP YOUR SCREENING

- Stream *I Am Still Your Child* to a computer via **CBC player** → <http://bit.ly/2xc1aR2>

(Please note that there will be commercial breaks)

- View on a big screen by using an LED projector or connecting your computer to a TV with an HDMI cable.
- A commercial-free version of the film is available for purchase on DVD, if you prefer that instead of streaming via the CBC Player or live outside of Canada for **\$25 + applicable taxes and shipping/handling**.

To order a copy, contact us at [iamstillyourchild@catbirdproductions.com](mailto:iamstillyourchild@catbirdproductions.com).

- A streaming version of the film on Vimeo-on-Demand will be available in the future.

# GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

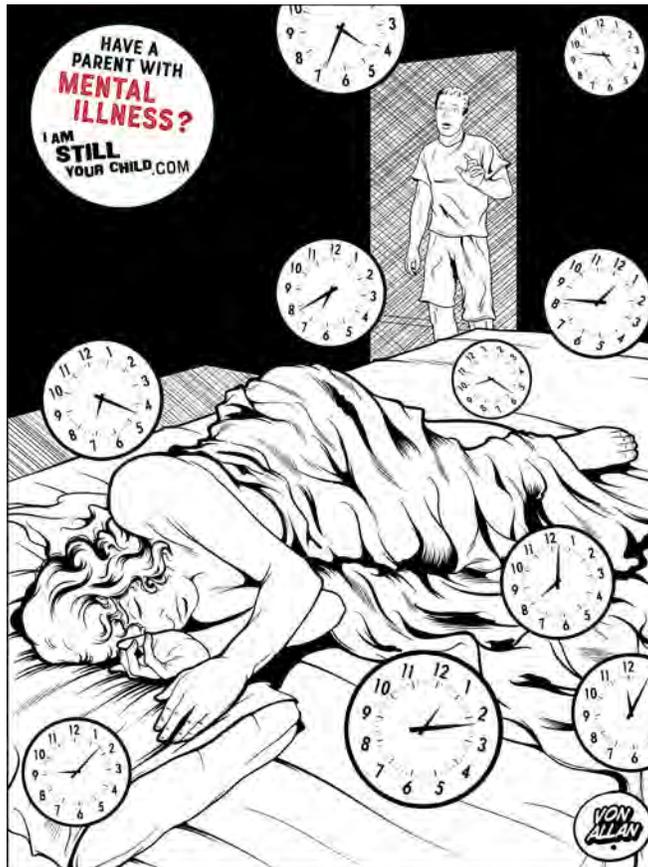
- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- In one word/phrase, what was your first reaction to the film? How did it make you feel?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask them?
- Did anything in the film “speak truth” to you?
- Name one thing you saw that was familiar and one thing that was surprising.
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing. Why was it so?
- According to the film, 1 in 5 Canadians experiences mental illness, and 60% of these people have children. Were you aware of how common the situation is? What was your understanding or experience of family mental illness before you watched the film?
- How do you think a parent having a mental illness can affect the whole family?
- How could a parent’s mental illness make an impact on a child’s education?
- In what ways do you think a parent’s mental illness could affect the resources of the family (eg finances, housing, life opportunities)?
- Often children of a parent suffering from mental illness and other young carers take on household tasks or responsibilities that an adult parent normally would. What might you identify as such in the stories of Sarah, Jessy and Von?
- There are different opinions on the subject of young carers. Some think it is not normal and negative for the child, while others think that children simply require support to care for their parents in ways they want to and are capable of. What do you think?
- Sarah, Jessy and Von all have a strong connection to the arts (music, drawing, painting) as a way to cope. Why do you think creative activities help a person in difficult times?
- Having a mentally ill parent can provoke a lot of mixed emotions. Can you imagine what these might be? (eg affection, anguish, worry, love, etc).
- Much of the 'problem' and requirement to change is still situated within the family, or with the individual child. What might need to change around the family, and in society at large, to make it better for them? (eg action related to alleviating poverty, improving access to health services, recognizing the situation through government policies in Canada, increasing awareness in

schools, etc).

- What can you do, as an individual, to reduce stigma, not just around mental illness, but around families who have these experiences, and around children who live in these circumstances as young carers?

## CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What is one thing you learned from the film that you wish everyone knew? What do you think would change if everyone knew it?
- This film is important because \_\_\_\_\_.
- I was inspired by \_\_\_\_\_.
- If you could make this film mandatory viewing for policy makers, what would you want their “takeaway” to be?



# PRODUCTION DETAILS

Duration:	45 minutes
Production Company:	Catbird Films, Inc.
Language:	English
Creative Team	<b>Producer</b> Katarina Soukup
	<b>Writer &amp; Director</b> Megan Durnford
	<b>Protagonists</b> Sarah Leavens Jessy Bokser Von Allan
	<b>Director of Photography</b> Alex Margineanu
	<b>Editor</b> Howard Goldberg
	<b>Original Music</b> Alain Auger
	<b>Sound</b> Stéphane Barsalou, Luc Raymond, Daniel Toussaint, Marco Fania
Shooting Format	HD, 16:9 aspect ratio
Sound	5.1 Surround or Stereo
Screening Format	Digital file
Locations	Montreal, Québec & Ottawa, Ontario
Broadcaster	CBC

# CREDITS

## WEBSITE & IMPACT CAMPAIGN

### **Impact Producers**

Stéphanie Couillard  
Katarina Soukup

### **Art Direction**

Sara Morley, Design Postimage

### **Community Screenings/Outreach**

Kathy Sperberg

### **Website Programming**

Nicolas Roy B., Folklore  
David Mongeau-Petitpas, Folklore  
Hugo St-Onge, Folklore

### **Web Capsules**

Tamara Scherbak  
Faisal Lutchmedial

### **Content Consultant**

Megan Durnford

### **Animation**

Eva Cvijanovic  
Malcolm Sutherland  
Simon Cottee