

“A personal obligation to share these stories”: Joella Cabalu and the making of her documentary *It Runs in the Family*



Still of *It Runs in the Family*

Nestled in the back corner of a cozy café on a crisp Saturday morning, I sat down with filmmaker **Joella Cabalu** to talk about her recent documentaries, *StandStill* (2013) and *It Runs in the Family* (2015). We spoke for nearly two hours in what felt more like a friendly conversation than an interview, as Joella shared her emotional journey in the making of both her films. As we sipped our coffees, Joella explained the barriers she faced with tackling a story as personal as the coming out of her brother, but also touched on the rewarding nature of documentary filmmaking.

In 2007, Joella’s brother, Jay, came out to her. Joella recalls, “when Jay came out to me, it was one of those circumstances that was almost surreal – I had to balance being a supportive sister with not letting shock read on my face.” At the time, she was finishing up her art history degree at UBC. She was the first person Jay had told in her family, and she knew that Jay would have a difficult time coming out to the rest of the family, given their Roman Catholic upbringing and Filipino background.

When Joella started studying film at Langara College’s Documentary Film Production program, she began to form a narrative in her mind about Jay’s coming out and its impact on her family. She knew she had to make a 10-minute project as her graduate film. “I knew going into school, I wanted to make essentially what would become *StandStill*. But really what I wanted to make was *It Runs in the Family*,” Joella explains to me. She knew the 10-minute short would be a good start to tackling a longer film.



Jay Cabalu

Joella constantly checked in with her brother throughout the writing stages of the film. "For him, it was going to be challenging, having to dig up all of those feelings again," Joella says. Soon after, she and Jay set out on a journey to track down other queer family members in both North America and the Philippines. As she and Jay got to know their relatives more, they began to think that Jay was not so different from the rest of his family after all. "We're trying to create this space to have this conversation and normalize it," she explained.

Joella's allyship to the LGBTQ+ community, her willingness to be vulnerable, and her empathy towards differing perspectives give the film a sense of maturity and completeness. It neither judges nor is assuming of other identities on the subject of LGBTQ+ rights. The story unfolds organically and both she and Jay are self-reflective in their interviews and encounters with family.

One of Joella's major moments of reflection was when director Steve James (*Hoop Dreams*) asked during a screening of a rough cut, why should I care about Jay? Joella realized that the objective of her film was not to portray Jay as a gay person, but as a person – period. "People really became interested in who Jay was when they saw his art," she explains. Because of this, Joella held a second interview with Jay and included footage of him making his art. This new addition provided a beautiful juxtaposition between Jay collaging materials together on a canvas and piecing together stories of his queer family. In the film, Jay mentions that collaging is the sum of all of his experiences. And so, Joella found the missing piece to complete her film.

"I feel that being the race that I am, and having the background that I have – I immigrated here as a kid – and the gender that I am as well, I am very aware of the inequity in terms of representation in the media. I feel a personal obligation to share these stories. I want my contribution to be unique and to add, for lack of a better word, diversity to the whole thing," Joella explains.

As the production of *It Runs in the Family* came to an end, Joella had a very different outlook than when she started the film: "It made me think about why you need to declare to the world [your orientation]?" In traveling to a different culture and listening to her family's stories and Jay's feelings, Joella was able to gain a deeper understanding on these issues, and she felt rewarded in how, ultimately, they are family and they will love and accept each other no matter their identity. But most importantly, Joella advises documentary makers "try and find what it means for you" in order to really make the process worth it.

It Runs in the Family will have its hometown premiere at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival on Tuesday August 16th at 9:00 pm, International Village. Buy tickets [here](#).



Joella Cabalu

It has screened all over North America, winning the Audience Choice Award at the Seattle Asian American Film Festival and special jury mention for social justice documentary at CAAMFest. It will have its Canadian television broadcast on OUTtv in October 2016.

By Zoe Arthur

Photos courtesy of Joella Cabalu

Zoe Arthur is a UBC film production student, minoring in gender, race, sexuality and social justice. She writes about social issues in a critical, feminist framework and aims to show how film can be a powerful tool for social change.