

Vancouver filmmaker learns about Filipino LGBT acceptance in "It Runs in the Family"

by [Craig Takeuchi](#) on August 12th, 2016 at 2:30 PM

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- In the short documentary "It Runs in the Family", filmmaker Joella Cabalu learnt about how LGBT family dynamics play out amongst her relatives.

After some audience members went to watch Joella Cabalu's latest short documentary at recent film festivals, they told her that they went into the screening bracing themselves for something terrible to happen.

Why? Because it was a film about how an Asian family handled having LGBT relatives.

Yet instead of impending tragedy or heart-wrenching drama, they were happily surprised to find that things "kept on getting better and better", Cabalu says on the line with the *Georgia Straight*.

The Vancouver filmmaker's short doc, "It Runs in the Family", is one of the few films which captures Asian—or this case Filipino—families handling LGBT issues in accepting and supportive ways.

"I think that's why I've been invited to so many Asian American film festivals because there's that lack of representation," she said. "Too often we see so many negative representations of Asian families and their kids coming out."

Locally in recent years, for instance, much media attention has focused on Asian Canadian members of evangelical Christian communities opposing LGBT-inclusive initiatives in Burnaby and Vancouver schools, with little to no representation of the contrary.

Consequently, Cabalu said that her film has been particularly refreshing for Asian LGBT viewers.

"For them, it's so affirming and inspiring like, 'Oh my goodness, these families do exist!' There's that sense of hope and I think that's ultimately what we're trying to share...and to inspire these kinds of dialogues as well."

In her 2014 short documentary, "StandStill", she documented the challenges her family faced in reconciling their Catholic beliefs when her brother, Jay, came out as gay.

In her new film, Joella and Jay travel to the U.S. and Philippines to meet and interview relatives who are LGBT. In Oakland, California, they meet Monica who is married to a woman and still lives with her family; in Manila, they meet Carlo/Jazz, who dresses up as a female but is nonchalant about what gender he is identified as; and several other members of their extended family who either accept or are LGBT people.



Vancouver filmmaker Joella Cabalu

It turned out to be quite the cross-cultural educational experience for Cabalu.

Cabalu, who has never lived in the Philippines and grew up in Canada, said she felt like a foreigner going there and was aware of being careful not to judge or impose her own Western ideals upon her interviewees or Filipino culture.

"With this film, and the entire journey, it's really made me reflect a lot about my Roman Catholic upbringing and what is it that I really believe, and it is really inspiring to meet Jazz and to see how confident he is and how he's very much a part of the family and his nephews and nieces," she said.

What she discovered is that, like in [many Asian cultures](#), although many of these LGBT people have not "come out" in the way North Americans are familiar with, they have been quietly accepted by their family members.

Some of them are even unfamiliar with LGBT terminology, such as transgender. As Jazz's dad, Tito Willie, explains at one point in the film, he sees his son and LGBT people simply as people, not within identity categories.

"I was very surprised...how candid and honest everyone was," she says of her relatives. "Even our crew, who were all Filipino from Manila, they were all very surprised about [how] openly [they were] talking about these really sensitive topics."

She said she hopes that the film will open up conversations and perceptions about how obligations to family and religion aren't always restrictive but can be negotiated in different ways. In addition, the experience has even made her think about how she can relate to people differently.

"It's good to...[know] what people are comfortable with but then let's not [let that] stop us from seeing the humanity of people," she said. "We may get a little bit caught up in all the categories that stop us from having meaningful conversations or just seeing people for who they are."

Back home in Vancouver, even though Cabalu is straight, she continues to be involved in LGBT issues on social media. In fact, she said half her friends on Facebook are queer people.

"I'm just really interested in how people see themselves and how is that reflected in media or representation in society," she explained. "So it's been really fascinating to learn [about] the privilege that I have and what other people are struggling with and what can I relate to and what should I give space for other people to speak about their own experience?"

While part of her motivation is her strong bond with her brother, she also said she feels there's a role that straight people can play in social awareness and understanding of LGBT people and issues.

"Being a hetero person, I feel like I could help people in the LGBT community along with...education. I feel like there's too much of an onus on that community to teach everybody else and I think that's what Vancouverites, or even Canadians, could do for the LGBT community."

It Runs in the Family Trailer - VQFF 2016



"It Runs in the Family" will screen at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival on Tuesday (August 16) at 9 p.m. at International Village. Joella and Jay Cabalu and producer Cari Green will participate in a post-screening discussion, moderated by the *Georgia Straight's* Craig Takeuchi.

*You can follow Craig Takeuchi on Twitter at twitter.com/cinecraig or on [Facebook](#). You can also follow the *Straight's* LGBT coverage on Twitter at twitter.com/StraightLGBT or on [Facebook](#).*