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Web Exclusive: A Lion in the House

BY MARC SILVER

“How could you stand to watch that movie? Isn’t it about kids with cancer?”

That’s what a friend said when I told her I’d previewed *A Lion in the House*, a four-hour documentary that is indeed about kids with cancer. They are the “lions” of the enigmatic title, which is taken from a quote by the writer Isak Dinesen: “You know you are truly alive when you are living among lions.”

I understand my friend’s sentiments. But it is because of the children—who are totally and truly alive even as they struggle to survive—that I kept watching. The kids cope with scary words, needle pokes, harsh chemicals and debilitating side effects no youngster should have to face. Yet they refuse to give up the right to be a child, and their youthful exuberance is a delight. Free-spirited 15-year-old Tim tries to trick the docs into thinking he’s gaining weight to stay strong. Spunky 7-year-old Alex, voted “cutest personality” at cancer camp, solemnly proclaims she had no idea she had a cute personality—and that makes her seem even cuter.

Lion, which airs on PBS June 21 and 22, owes its existence to Robert Arceci, MD, former chief oncologist at the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital. Inspired by the basketball documentary *Hoop Dreams*, he asked filmmakers Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar to consider the topic of childhood cancer. It was a subject they knew only too well. Their daughter was diagnosed with cancer as a teenager (she is now in good health). Reichert and Bognar spent six years on the project. The Cincinnati hospital, where the kids were treated, and the families themselves allowed access to moments of the utmost intimacy: from a brain biopsy to a family meeting about whether it’s time to face the inevitability of a son’s death.

Regina, the single mom of 11-year-old Al, compares the cancer experience to being “wrung out [in] a washing machine,” and that’s how it feels to watch *Lion*. The ups and downs are never ending: remission, return, experimental treatments that succeed, experimental treatments that fail, a glorious day at an amusement park, a dark night in the ICU. The movie is often heartbreaking; not all of the kids survive. Yet it is enriched by their spirit and humor. Even young Al cracks wise about hospital red tape, “You gotta have a prescription to get some tissues.”

“One of the huge lessons from cancer,” says Reichert, “is learning how to live with vast uncertainty. It completely shakes you out of your complacency.” She herself was shaken to her core on Jan. 20, when she and Bognar arrived in Utah for the premiere of *Lion* at the Sundance film festival. That same day, her doctor called to say that symptoms of fatigue, chest pains and a constant cough were caused by a cancerous tumor wrapped around her heart. Reichert is now being treated for her rare strain of lymphoma, trying to live up to the lion-hearted example of the

families she met in *Lion*.

For more on *A Lion in the House*, visit
www.pbs.org/independentlens/lioninthehouse.