

Personal statement by the director

As a filmmaker, I'm drawn to complex topics that tend to be poorly understood in the community. I find "a way in" so the audience can engage with the issue. I do this by telling the personal stories of likeable characters. I was interested in making a film about mental illness and specifically schizophrenia given it is probably the most stigmatized of all mental health conditions. Often associated with fear and violence, I wanted to give voice to someone who was experiencing the condition, to connect them with the broader community so their story might create awareness and empathy.

Jeremy Oxley is obviously a fabulous character as he is so charismatic, funny and engaging. Of course he doesn't represent all people living with schizophrenia, as everyone's experience of the condition is different. However elements of his story resonate with people living with mental illness and those who care for them.

In many ways I feel like I have just scratched the surface of Jeremy's amazing story, particularly the level of pain he experienced throughout his life. Jeremy never felt particularly comfortable talking about those times and I completely understand and respect that. Maintaining his well-being throughout the filming process was my top priority so whatever he was able to share I was grateful for. I did think it was important to go to those dark days in order to honour his story and for people to understand how far he had come. I also hope it helps create empathy for other people who are suffering a psychotic illness.

The fact that Jeremy often doesn't believe he has schizophrenia weighed heavily on me. I wanted Jeremy to be empowered by the process of making the film and to feel fairly represented in the final product otherwise I would have failed. I worked very hard to understand and then convey his perspective of his story in a way that would be true to him and also accessible to the audience. The most gratifying moment for me in the entire process of making this film is when Jeremy watched the cut and said it he thought it was true and that I'd done a good job.

Although it was Jeremy's mental illness that brought me to his story, I do not see him as a man reduced to this condition. I admire his incredible strength of character to have survived decades of pain. I feel very honored to have got to know Jeremy, Mary and Peter and I am very grateful for all that they have shared. The trust that they showed me was incredible and the main reason this film is as powerful as it is.

Stories or incidents in the course of making the film

In the very early days of making the film I had a number of concerns about how I was going to be able to work with Jeremy and how possible it would be for me to access his story. I wasn't sure if he would be well enough to participate over a long period of time and how much I could depend upon him to maintain a commitment to the film. Thinking ahead to when the film would be completed (if I could actually make it), I had concerns about whether he would feel the film fairly represented him given his reality can be quite different to others.

I had to put Jeremy's well being as my top priority because I did not want the process of making the film to harm him in anyway. I couldn't rush the process or push him. I took him to places in his past (in interview) but I had to let Jeremy dictate how much would be discussed and when that could happen. It was a process I could guide but couldn't control. I had to put a lot of faith in Jeremy and hope he would put his faith in me.

As a filmmaker there's a lot of pressure to come up with the goods and show proof of access to a strong character and a strong story otherwise you don't get support and funding. Although I always believed in Jeremy and what he would bring to this film, it was hard to show that for many many months. The access came with the development of our relationship and the building of trust. So I had to self fund much of the production and that caused considerable stress for me, stress I had to absorb and not pass onto Jeremy.

As the process continued and as I got to understand Jeremy I realized he respected me as a fellow "artist". He was aware of how much effort I was putting into his story, how committed I was to getting it right and doing it with integrity. I think my work ethic resonated with him because that's how he approached his work as a musician when he was young, passionate and optimistic, before he had been chewed up and spat out by the music industry. He used to put his heart and soul into his music and I think he could see I was doing the same with this film.

There were difficult areas I thought needed to be included in the film in order to honour Jeremy's story. I discussed these with Mary and Jeremy, was just very honest about my intent. It may have taken a while but on every occasion Jeremy would think about what I said and when he was ready he would respond. More often than not he agreed with what I was suggesting. Whenever Jeremy said he would be available for something, he was. If he ever made a commitment to anything, he would follow through.

When Jeremy made the decision that he wanted to do the reunion show with the *Sunnyboys*, I have to admit I was a bit anxious on his behalf. He didn't know the songs very well, he didn't rehearse all that much on his own and when he did he used to sing in a "funny voice". He told me he was pacing his psychic energy and rehearsing too much on his own might confuse him, he needed to be with the band. Only 3 days

of rehearsal after 21 years apart, it was quite a privilege to witness that first day. They all picked up their instruments and started playing like they had never been apart. Jeremy focused his mind on remembering the lyrics and guitar parts. He knew he could depend upon the other 3 guys in the *Sunnyboys* because he did in their hey day and that kind of connection never dies. I heard Jeremy sing properly for the first time and saw him trying his hardest. It sounded fantastic and the feeling in the room was incredible. It was at that moment I knew he was going to be all right.

Jeremy paced and protected himself for the 3-month lead up to that show. He knew what energy he would have to put in and he knew how much he had to give. Those sort of survival skills have probably helped him throughout the decades of his illness. I admire his strength. I also admire his professionalism. He was never going to let the other guys down in the band and they were there to back him and put their confidence in him.

When I did ultimately show Jeremy the completed film, I was a little anxious about how he would feel about certain parts. I had prepared him as much as possible but still, I knew it would be confronting. He was a bit uncomfortable with some sections but at the end he said he thought it was true and that I had done a good job. He's not too sure about all the content on schizophrenia but he does know it's something I am interested in so hopefully the film will help in some way. I think Jeremy's only criticism of *THE SUNNYBOY* is that it should have been 3 hours long - he reckons he couldn't get enough of himself in the 90 min version!

All the concerns I had in the early days of making the film never came to pass. Jeremy does struggle with the symptoms of his mental illness every day and he doesn't have much insight into his condition, but none of this created an insurmountable barrier for me and the film. His strength of character and his professionalism always shone through. I will be forever grateful.

Kay Harrison, director