

Summary of the Film

John and Michael celebrates the special friendship between two men with Down syndrome. They became best friends in the group home where they lived. They truly loved each other and were like family, supporting each other through scary and lonely times, sharing domestic chores, acting silly together and having fun. Their friendship brought joy to day-to-day routines. When John died suddenly of a heart condition, Michael's grief was enormous. His love and imagination and memories of their good times together helped him cope.



Introduction by Shira Avni

I recently found a drawing I did when I was 6 years old. The text reads, "When I grow up I will be an artist and a vet." I had drawn a picture of myself holding a cat and a painting. I was always doodling, making clay characters and puppets out of old socks and buttons and anything else I could get my hands on. Some grown-ups said, "You can't make puppets and draw forever. Do your homework!" I did my homework, but I never stopped making art. When I grew up and went to university, I took an animation class and discovered that it was the perfect combination of drawing, puppets, and magic.

The film **John and Michael** is based on my memories of two men I had the privilege of working with many years ago at a summer camp for developmentally disabled adults in Ontario, Canada. I taught arts & crafts and got to know John and Michael. I worked there for four summers as a teenager and have some of the most wonderful memories of my life from that time. I met many people that I loved very much, but I remember John and Michael best of all.

Everybody loved John and Michael. They were best friends and were always joking around and making gentle mischief together that made everyone smile. Sometimes John would do a magic trick that got him more cookies for dessert. Sometimes Michael would tickle his friends while John would pretend to sit on them!

John was big and tall and had a quiet little voice, and Michael was small and round and had a great big voice! They were both about the same age, in their late twenties at the time. Both had Down syndrome – a developmental disability. They used to spend a lot of time together, walking, talking, hugging and looking at nature. They both loved to swim and to dance and to draw and to go on hikes, but most of all they loved to laugh! I missed them very much when I stopped working at the summer camp and often wondered how they were doing. I always imagined them enjoying their work and their lives; anything was fun as long as they were together.

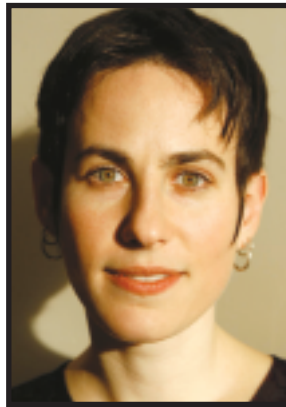
Many years later, I was studying film at an art school in Chicago. One day, a good friend of mine came to visit. She had worked at the same summer camp, and she told me the bad news that John had died a short while before. I was extremely sad and could not stop thinking about Michael and about how sad he must have been to lose his very close friend.

A few days later, I was sitting in a café, doodling and listening to some lovely music that I had never heard before. The music made me cry with its beautiful sadness and inspired me to draw little pictures of John and Michael – small sketches of my memories of their relationship. Suddenly I had a little storyboard in my sketchbook and realized that I wanted to make a movie about John and Michael. The story is fictional, but very much based upon these two amazing people. I wrote a letter to the musicians whose music had moved me so deeply – a wonderful band called Ida – and asked them if I could use their beautiful

songs. They liked the story very much and were happy to let me use their music for the film. I ended up using seven different pieces of their music. The longest one is called "Don't Get Sad," which is the last song in the film.

I wanted the story to be told by someone who would make the audience feel the emotions that I felt when I thought about John and Michael. Brian, whose warm, wonderful voice narrates the film, has Down syndrome, as well. He was about the same age as John and Michael were when I knew them. Brian loved the story, but he was shy about reading the script, so I showed him the storyboard drawings and asked him to tell me the story in his own words. This became the final narration that you hear in the film.

Brian's infectious laugh made everyone giggle, and his sensitive, direct understanding of the story made me feel like he really knew John and Michael.



The animation of **John and Michael** is done in an unusual way: instead of using drawings or puppets or computers, I spread a thin layer of brown modelling clay on a glass table that had a light underneath it. The light shone through the clay, so where the clay was thinner you could see light, and where it was thicker was dark. I used my fingers to "paint" with the clay. I worked in a totally dark room, where the only light came through the clay-on-glass paintings. The process of animation takes a very long time. In order to create the illusion of movement, I had to make 24 frames (pictures) for every single second of animation

– 1,400 pictures a minute – 14,400 pictures for ten minutes of film!

John and Michael has been playing at film festivals around the world. It has been wonderful to see people's different reactions. Working on this film has been a very emotional experience, and I have been moved by the responses it evokes. It's inspiring to work on something that seems to make people think and feel deeply. I hope this film can play a role in opening people's minds and hearts to ideas of difference.

These days, I draw and make animated films for a living. I teach animation classes, too, and love seeing the amazing ideas my students come up with. I never did become a vet, but I do have a very funny cat named Oliver who likes to stomp all over my artwork. Animation combines elements of many different art forms – drawing, painting, puppetry, music, dance, acting, film, storytelling – there is always something new and challenging to think about! Art makes people think and feel and question and see the world in a whole new way.

The Script

This is the original script that I wrote before meeting Brian, the wonderful narrator of ***John and Michael***. The script was written from the point of view of someone who is more literally inside the group home with John and Michael. You can see where Brian used the written lines he remembered and where he was giving his own interpretation of what he understood from the storyboard. Aside from the fact that Brian was shy about his reading ability, there are things in the script that I never thought about as something difficult for people with Down syndrome – i.e. the four and five-syllable words “enormously” and “particularly” – were impossible for him to say! Also the sentence structure is needlessly complex. I learned a lot from that recording session!

— Shira Avni

John was very enormously big
And Michael was particularly small.
They lived together in a group home
And were the best of friends.

They liked to do all kinds of things together
And made each other very happy.

In the mornings John would wake up at dawn.
He'd sneak out of bed
And brush his teeth
And cook a big breakfast for everyone.
Afterwards they would all clean up together
And everyone would go off to work.

Sometimes
On the warmest summer evenings
I'd see them dancing in the quiet hall
Or out on the grass
And it was as though they heard the same
Joyful music.
And then they'd collapse
And giggle at the ceiling
Or the stars.

But one day
In his thirty-second year
John's heart gave out
And he died.

And I wonder
If Michael sees him sometimes
And if he still dances
And laughs at the stars
Knowing John would never truly leave him
Behind...



The Narration

People with Down syndrome are usually delayed in motor and language development and often have mild speech difficulty as adults. This means that the listener has to pay careful attention to what they are saying and ask to have it repeated if need be. The narrator of this film has Down syndrome himself and may not be understood fully on first hearing. The visual aspect of the film tells the story pretty well by itself and an attentive listener will understand the gist of what Brian is saying and feel the emotions behind it. The text of his narration is included here, as well as the words to the song at the end.

Text:

Shira: So, um, tell me what the story's about.

Brian: OK, um...The story's about...uh...Michael.

John was very very big

And Michael was

Very very small

They lived in a group home

They grew up together

And they are very good friends.

I just feel great about those two because

They are very, very special persons.

(Prompted by the question, Do you have a best friend?)

Actually, um, I do have, I do have a best friend who goes to the same school as mine...and we used to – um – hang out...

And actually, um, we were always teasing and playing

And all that kind of stuff, so...

I just have a great time with my relationship to him.

He sneaks out of the bed

He get up and brush his teeth

He went to sleep, snoring

He got up and make a big breakfast

Have a cup of tea

And he go after and he

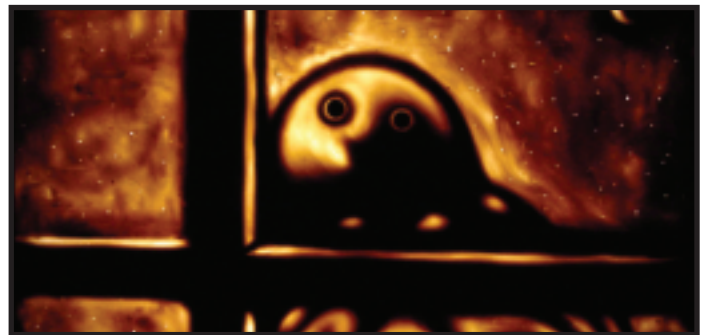
Close the door and go outside to go to work.

And big John say, "Shhhhh!"

After that he dances

And collapse on the floor and giggles at the ceiling

And the stars.



This is funny, ok?

Hee hee hee...

But one day...

In his thirty-second year

John's heart gave out

And he died.

Michael was crying and upset

And he said something, um...

Did he have a nightmare, or he didn't?

He was on the bed thinking

Thinking about him

And see how do he feel.

He was feeling about John...and...

John came back and gave him a hug

'Cause that's what he did.

[Song: "Don't Get Sad"]

Brian: I love the sad part

Shira: Tell me why you like the sad part.

Brian: I dunno – I just...like the sad part.

END

Music

Lyrics to "Don't Get Sad" by IDA, written by Daniel Littleton:

Don't get sad on me
Don't get sad on me
I may not have a lot of comfort to spare
But I hear you
I hear you
So put on your coat and your hat and your gloves and go walking
Take one hand out of your glove on the street when you're walking
Look straight ahead, don't turn around when you're walking
Nothing can hurt you now
Don't turn around when you're walking
Away...away...

One verse was cut from the film:

*Your love isn't gone
It's just moved on
It's inside you now
It feels so heavy
Your love isn't gone
It's just moved on
It's inside you now
You'll find it somehow*

IDA contact:
www.idamusic.com



Classroom Uses

Children 10 and over and teens will appreciate and understand this film. It is a good film for adults with disabilities to entertain and to spark discussion.

This film can be used in several ways:

- In art education
- In a curriculum on disability and diversity
- As part of a curriculum that deals with close and loving relationships
- As part of discussions on bereavement

Art Just as reading and math and social studies enrich our lives, so does art. It belongs in the curriculum. Drawing, dance, music, sculpture, storytelling, theatre and film are people's ways of expressing their strongest feelings, handling life's hardships, sharing experiences and creating something beautiful. Learning about art and doing art give children access to lifelong interests, hobbies, skills and careers. For some children it is the main avenue through which they can show their intelligence and talents. Creating art brings students of all ages self-confidence and a sense of their own individuality.

Unfortunately, schools devote less time and fewer resources than they once did to art programs and art specialists. Classroom teachers may not have the time or expertise to teach children about art. Film is a wonderful point of entry. And this particular film is a marvellous instance of a slice of life that, to people unfamiliar with the world of disability, may seem dreary and unfulfilling. However, the artist sees it in all its richness. Using drawing, animation and music, the filmmaker highlights the beauty and joy in the day-to-day relationship between two people; and the awful sadness when one of them dies.

Shira's animated story is much more powerful than the simple telling of the story in words. It goes far beyond words, provoking thoughts and awakening feelings.

In attempting to answer questions about this and other artistic objects, students will learn from each other.

Suggested assignments or topics for discussion:

Before watching the film, have students read and discuss Shira's account of how she came to make this film and the original text of the narration.

Some activities and questions after viewing:

- Retell the story in your own words.
- Why was this story worth telling?
- How did the artist turn it into a work of art?

- How did each of the following play a part: drawing, colour, music (and lyrics), movement, symbols?
- Do you think the song at the end is a sad song or a happy song?

Read the poem "Giacometti's Dog" by Robert Wallace.

<http://www.uni-essen.de/anglistik/bernd/giaco2.htm>

Think about the last three lines

We'll stand in line all day
to see one man
love anything enough.

- How can that relate to this film or other works of art you know?
- Find a poem or a picture or a piece of music that made you happy or sad or angry or surprised.
- Dr. Howard Stein, formerly head of the theatre department at Columbia University, said, "The playwright has the luxury of re-creating a human experience that will illuminate and reflect for the audience the energy and beauty of a life being lived." Can that apply to the filmmaker here?

Some viewers of this film may want to try their hand at animation.

Storyboarding and animation workshop resources for teachers:

<http://www.nfb.ca/enclasse/handson/html/en/index.html>



Disability

One of the gifts of this film about John and Michael, two men with Down syndrome, is the picture it portrays of their humanity; their capacity for love and friendship and kindness and fun. Though they may be intellectually disabled, their emotions are not at all impaired. Their joy in each other and Michael's sadness at John's death are unmistakable. It's important for children to understand this. At this time when professionals, families, and governments want people with disabilities to be integrated into the mainstream, in pre-schools, schools, recreational facilities and jobs, it is important that society welcome them and acknowledge their right to full participation in the community.

Not very long ago there was a very different scenario. There was shame and stigma associated with Down syndrome. Parents who gave birth to children with Down syndrome were advised to put them in an institution or place them for adoption. Schools had no obligation to educate them. Employers were reluctant to hire them, seeing only the disabilities and missing the abilities that were there.



Fortunately, many parents who ignored the advice to place their children outside the home wrote about the joy their Down syndrome child brought to the family; and many writers have described the wonderful disposition of their Down syndrome child. As more and more children were kept at home, professionals saw that with family support, special education programs or supported integration, these children were able to grow up with dignity and self-respect and were able to acquire social and vocational skills so that they could hold jobs, take part in community recreation and live semi-independently.

It is extremely important that students learn about diversity and all kinds of disability. They may need to be taught that people who look different or whose speech is hard to understand, who are less able physically and who take longer to learn skills, are every bit as human as their able-bodied friends. And, as humans, they share the same feelings, have the same need for love and friendship and the same capacity for joy and sadness.

After screening the film, consider these questions or assignments.

1. Did you learn anything about Down syndrome from this film? Some college students who watched it were surprised to find out that people with Down syndrome —

- shave
- have jobs
- can look after their domestic needs
- take care of each other
- have a sense of humour
- grieve

2. Assignments: Find out about Down syndrome (how common is it, characteristics, a typical story)

RESOURCES

Everything You Need to Know about Down Syndrome, Mary Bowman-Kruhm. Library Binding, 1999 (reading level 9-11 years).

Canadian Down Syndrome Society: <http://www.cdss.ca>

Reading list of books about Down Syndrome (including children's books): http://www.parentbooks.ca/Down_Syndrome.html

Disability-themed films from the National Film Board:

Arjuna, Sylvie Van-Brabant, 1999

I'll Find a Way, Beverly Shaffer, 1977 (Oscar winner!)

A Mind of Your Own, Gail Sweeney, 1999

My Brand New Life - Wheelchair Challenge, Kaveh Nabatian, 2003

Some suggested films about Down syndrome:

Dreams

The National Down Syndrome Society has produced a moving short live-action video titled *Dreams*, which features children and adults with Down syndrome talking about their dreams and what they're proud of in their lives.

<http://www.ndss.org/>

<http://www.ndss.org/content.cfm?fuseaction=NDSS.article&article=1042>

Duo

Stephane Ginnsz, a 12-year-old actor with Down syndrome, stars as Stephan, a student in special education who falls in love with Joan (Eden Riegel), a young violinist. To communicate, he draws a picture for her. In exchange, she teaches him three notes of music, and Stephan starts to dream: one day he will be her accompanist. <http://www.duo.agprods.com/>

Other disability-themed films:

How's Your News?

A group of adults with developmental disabilities travel around the USA interviewing people in a news-report style. The film became an indie hit and toured all over the world.

<http://www.howsyournews.org/>

Out of Our Minds

Profile of the Back to Back Theatre Company – a professional theatre company in Australia puts on ambitious, experimental performances written/designed by the actors themselves, who are all developmentally disabled. This film contains sexual content and adult language, and is recommended for older teens/disabled adults.

Friendship

After viewing the film these questions can be addressed:

- Do you have a best friend?
- What kinds of things do you do together? What do you do for each other?
- Make a drawing, or write a poem, a story or essay about a good friend.
- Who are some really good friends in story and film?
Examples:
David and Jonathan
Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn
Tom Sawyer and Jim
Harry Potter and Ron and Hermione
Dorothy and the Scarecrow
Bert and Ernie
Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson
- How do they show their friendship?
- Have you ever had a friend with a disability?

Below are some questions that were used to start discussion in a group of adults with learning disabilities.

- Who is telling the story? How does he know John and Michael?
- What are John and Michael's jobs? (cook and crossing guard)
- How do you know this? (John has a chef's hat and apron on; Michael has a Stop sign and vest on as they leave the house to go to work.)
- Do John and Michael remind you of anyone you know?
- How do they show their friendship?
- How does Michael start to feel better after John dies?
- How does the song at the end make you feel?
- Did you laugh when the narrator was laughing? Why?
- What did you feel during the thunderstorm?
- Were you scared? How do you react when you get scared?
- Did you cry?
- What made you feel sad in the film? (Most people say that they don't cry at the scene when John actually dies – it's usually either when John's ghost-bird appears and hugs him, or else when Michael opens the door and runs out into the snow.)

The film deals with some complex topics. Some students might ask this question:

"Are John and Michael gay?"

Shira's response:

The film can definitely be read as a love story. John and Michael, as I knew them, had a very close friendship. They used to kiss and cuddle all the time and deeply loved each other's company. However, people with Down syndrome and some other disabilities are often more comfortable and open with their expressions of love and physical affection – if you love someone, you show it by hugging and kissing them. They loved each other very much, and that is ultimately what I was hoping to portray in the film.

The teacher might say: That's a question people often asked about the muppets Bert and Ernie on *Sesame Street*. What makes you wonder about that? Would it change the story?



Bereavement

Class discussion of bereavement may arise out of an incident in the community, the bereavement of a member of the class or as part of a social studies project. After showing the film, ask some of these questions:

- Have you ever had a good friend move away?
- How did you feel? Were you able to keep in touch?
- Have there been any deaths among your close friends or family members? What is it like to feel sad?
- What helped you feel better (Lots of friends around? Conversation? Writing or drawing something about the person? Remembering? Food? Flowers? Going for a walk? Talking to your friend in your mind? Reading a book? Waiting for time to pass?)
- Have you ever tried to help a grieving friend feel better? How?
- What do you think the song at the end is saying about sadness?

Read and think about this poem whose author is anonymous.

You Can Shed Tears

You can shed tears that he is gone
 Or you can smile because he has lived.
 You can close your eyes and pray that he'll come back
 Or you can open your eyes and see all he's left.
 Your heart can be empty because you can't see him
 Or you can be full of the love you shared.
 You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday
 Or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday.
 You can remember him and only that he's gone
 Or you can cherish his memory and let it live on.
 You can cry and close your mind, be empty and turn your back
 Or you can do what he'd want, smile, open your eyes, love and go on.

Does John really come back?

Shira's response:

That scene is based upon a dream I had about a friend of mine who died some years ago – I had a very lovely, peaceful dream that he came back to say goodbye, and when I woke up I felt better. I don't know whether it was just a dream or something more, but I was very happy to be able to have one final memory of him. I thought of that when making *John and Michael*, and imagined that maybe Michael had a similar experience.

The teacher might say: Sometimes a very powerful wish makes us feel that it is really happening. Could that be the case here? Is Michael dreaming? Feeling John come back, whether in a dream or in reality, made Michael feel better. Does it matter whether it really happened?

See the book list on grieving from http://www.bbc.co.uk/relationships/coping_with_grief/furtherreading_index.shtml

For children and young adults

Grief in Children: A Handbook for Adults,
 Atle Dyregrov

ISBN: 185302113X

Helps adults to know how to respond appropriately to the bereaved child's needs.

Healing your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Tips,
 Alan Wolfelt

ISBN: 1879651238

Practical tips and suggested activities to help teenagers through their pain.

Sibling Bereavement: Helping Children Cope with Loss

Ann Farrant

ISBN: 0304702056

A psychologist looks at how parents can help surviving children after a bereavement. With case studies.

When Parents Die: Learning to Live with the Loss of a Parent,

Rebecca Abrams

ISBN: 0415200660

This is aimed at readers of all ages and considers the continuing importance of the dead parent and the critical role of the surviving parent.

