

Voices of 2e

Tom Ropelewski, Filmmaker

2e on the big screen? And now a sequel? Who would've thought?

Tom Ropelewski, for one. The Hollywood screenwriter and director has mainly worked in comedy, but people at his son's school for twice-exceptional students, Bridges Academy in Los Angeles, suggested to him that the class of 2011 might make an interesting subject for a documentary. As Ropelewski described them in a 2015 interview with *2e Newsletter*, "These kids were articulate, funny, and incredibly open about their challenges and issues. They also had a strong sense of who they were and were excited about heading off into the world."

So he took on the challenge of turning their story in the documentary *2e: Twice Exceptional*. What he had in mind was making a film for parents like himself, "parents who are struggling with the challenges of raising brilliant kids who just can't fit into the mainstream school system. I wanted them to feel that they aren't alone, that with time, support, and the right learning environment, there's light at the end of the tunnel... or at least at the end of high school."

The film debuted in 2015. Ropelewski entered it in a few film festivals to gain some exposure and, to his surprise, it started winning awards. "At screenings," Ropelewski says, "Adults would tell me that they were probably twice-exceptional and would've benefited from the type of educational model represented by Bridges Academy in the film. Teens would thank me for making a film about them. And, at the North Carolina Conference for the Gifted and Talented in 2015, the coordinator of the gifted program for the entire state public school system announced she was starting a

state task force on twice-exceptionality and ordered 150 copies of the film to distribute to each of her school districts."

This film was not Ropelewski's initial entry into documentary filmmaking. His first documentary was "*Child of Giants: My Journey with Maynard Dixon and Dorothea Lange*, which told the story of his wife's grandparents, an artist and a photographer. Nor would *2e: Twice Exceptional* be his last. As he traveled around the country to screenings of the film, the filmmaker notes that "Some of the most persistent questions I got were from teachers, often from public schools, who wanted to know how they could be more effective with their 2e students."

Ropelewski found that many teachers were frustrated, feeling that they were failing some of their brightest kids. He explains, "They wanted to know more specifically what goes on in the Bridges classrooms — what strategies the teachers there were using to engage these kids and how could they apply those strategies in their own classrooms." So with the approval of Bridges Academy, the sequel was born, *2e2: Teaching the Twice Exceptional*. This film, Ropelewski decided, would focus on teachers, the issues they face on a daily basis with 2e students — like social anxiety and perfectionism — and how they try to solve them.

Will there be a third in the series? The filmmaker's reply is: "I wouldn't rule it out. Let's see what kinds of questions this film generates." [See a review of *2e2: Teaching the Twice Exceptional* elsewhere in this issue.]

When asked what impact he thinks his films have had, Ropelewski responds that the audience's

understanding of the concept of twice-exceptionality has changed over time. He explains that when he began screening the first documentary, "many people had never even heard the term 2e, although they had kids who fit the description. Now at the screenings, there are many more people who arrive informed and are already actively advocating for their kids."

In addition to increasing awareness of twice-exceptionality, Ropelewski hopes that people will come away from the films with an understanding that the strategies used at Bridges can apply to any learning environment and benefit every student. But perhaps what's most rewarding to him is "when a parent or student tells me they feel less alone after seeing my films. That means everything to me. This is by far the most rewarding work I've ever done."

Purchase information and the official trailers for both documentaries are available at these websites: www.2emovie.com and www.2emovie.com/2e2.

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**Tom Ropelewski in 2016
introducing "2e: Twice Exceptional"**