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Just Benjamin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

Paige Murphy
University of Central Arkansas
Bachelor of Arts in Digital Filmmaking, 2014

December 2021
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council

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ABSTRACT

This documentary short film is about a now 30-year-old transgender man telling his story of growing up queer in a small Arkansas town, from being outed as a lesbian in high school, to ultimately being accepted as a trans man by members of his military and biological families. Benjamin “Benji” Davis grew up in the small town of Friendship, Arkansas, enlisted in the U.S. Army shortly after high school and served for six years, then came back to Arkansas and primarily lived in Little Rock until he moved to Denver, Colorado this fall. The documentary is structured linearly both with Benji’s past and present storylines; the film follows Benji from June to September 2021 and chronicles parts of Benji’s story from being assigned female at birth to present-day, nearly four years into his transition. Benji hopes that moving to Colorado will be a fresh start for him, a place where he can be “just Benjamin.” The goal of this documentary is to provide Benji an outlet for telling his story to friends, family, and strangers, hopefully guiding the audience to understand the point of view of a trans person from Arkansas and that of his father, a religious Southern man who loves and supports his child despite his upbringing. My hope is Benji’s story will encourage viewers to be compassionate, especially those who don’t know much or anything about the trans or LGBTQ+ community in general.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Davis (Benji) is from Friendship, Arkansas, a town of about 200 people located 60 miles southwest of Little Rock. Growing up in Friendship, Benji, who was assigned female at birth, knew he was different from his peers. As a teenager who still presented as female, Benji was outed as a lesbian by a fellow student to his school principal and parents and was subsequently required to suppress his sexuality and change his behavior. Still presenting as female, Benji joined the military shortly after high school and served for six years as a 91 Bravo, a vehicle mechanic. It wasn't until 22-year-old Benji googled what it meant to be "female but feel like a boy" that he finally knew the term that described the gender dysphoria he had felt most of his life: transgender. Benji discovered a whole new world of people who were like him, other transgender people who were discussing and documenting their journeys online. At 26, Benji came out for the second time in his life, this time as a transgender man. Most of Benji's military family accepted and even protected him through this process.

The purpose of this film is to document the life of a transgender man in Arkansas. This film is primarily about Benji's journey, but it also touches on the larger themes of love and understanding, particularly from Benji's parents Eric and Becky Davis. The purpose of this research is to explore the treatment of trans people in Arkansas and in the United States as a whole, from the angles of access to health care and representation in mainstream media. The research questions I am exploring are:

1. What factors contribute to Benji or transgender/other LGBTQ people as a whole feeling unsafe living in a place such as Arkansas?
2. How does lack of access to gender-affirming health care affect trans people's mental and emotional health?

3. How has trans representation in mainstream media changed in recent years, and what effects do accurate and considerate representation have on cisgender viewers?

The title “Just Benjamin” came from my first interview with Benji. At least twice during that interview, Benji used those exact words or expressed the same sentiment with similar words as he was discussing his desire to move from Arkansas (for example, “I just want to be me.”)

The last line of the film is a quote from Benji that expresses that: “I simply want to be Benjamin.” Those words stuck with me through filming because of how succinctly they reflect Benji’s desire to be validated as the person he has always felt like internally, even if his physical characteristics did not originally match that.

This literature review will use the following terms; for reference, definitions for most of these terms were gathered from the University of Washington School of Medicine, the American Psychological Association, or Columbia University Department of Psychiatry:

1. **Assigned sex at birth**— “The sex (male or female) assigned to a child at birth, most often based on the child’s external anatomy. (UW Medicine).”
2. **Cisgender**— “A person whose gender identity and assigned sex at birth correspond (UW Medicine).”
3. **Gender affirming healthcare**— “medical and psychosocial health care designed to affirm individuals' gender identities (Columbia University 2021).”
4. **Gender dysphoria** – “Distress experienced by some individuals whose gender identity does not correspond with their assigned sex at birth. Manifests itself as clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) includes gender dysphoria as a diagnosis (UW Medicine).”

5. **LGBTQ** – an acronym for “lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer.” Sometimes shortened to “LGBT,” this acronym may also include “IA+,” or “intersex,” “asexual,” and anyone who falls outside of these seven terms, such as ally, pansexual, androgynous, non-binary, etc. However, many who fall into the latter category simply self-identify as “queer.”
6. **Queer** – “an umbrella term that individuals may use to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms (American Psychological Association & National Association of School Psychologists 2015).”
7. **Transgender** – “Describes a person whose gender identity and assigned sex at birth do not correspond. Also used as an umbrella term to include gender identities outside of male and female. Sometimes abbreviated as trans (UW Medicine).”

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2019, the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Public Policy (Williams Institute) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) conducted an analysis of 42 studies in the U.S. and Canada from 1997 to 2016. The analysis found that transgender adults are about four times more likely to have suicidal thoughts and about six times more likely to attempt suicide than the U.S. population as a whole. Additionally, the analysis found that:

“existing studies suggest that not only do transgender people have many of the same risk factors for suicidality found in the general population, such as depression and substance use, but in addition have risk factors related to minority stressors, such as experiences of

discrimination, stigma, family rejection, and lack of access to gender-affirming health care (Herman et al, 2019).”

The subject of this film, Benjamin Davis, stated in his interview that his birth mother and his now ex-wife rejected him after he came out as trans; Benji’s recollection is that both used the word “freak” in disavowing him.

A July 2020 survey by the Williams Institute estimates that 1.4 million adults in the U.S. identify as transgender; approximately 13,400 of those reside in Arkansas (Conron and Goldberg, 2020). Lucie’s Place, a Little Rock, Arkansas-based organization, was founded in 2012 for the sole purpose of assisting LGBT young adults in Arkansas who are experiencing homelessness. It is currently still the only organization of its kind in Arkansas. During his first interview, Benjamin said that he and his roommate and chosen brother, Chris B., felt that they had to move out of Arkansas out of concerns for their everyday safety. Benjamin referenced “this last year” as an example in explaining why he and Chris do not feel safe living Arkansas, despite hoping that conditions would improve for trans people. Benjamin was referring to recent anti-trans Arkansas House Bills that were proposed and/or passed in 2021: HB1749, HB1882, and HB1570. HB1749 was designed to prevent public school employees from being required to address students by their preferred names or pronouns and died in the Senate Committee in October 2021 (HB1749, 2021). HB1882, or “An Act to Create the Arkansas Privacy Accommodations Act,” also died in the Senate Committee in October 2021, but had it passed, it would have allowed private individuals to sue government entities if they encountered a trans person in a multi-occupancy bathroom designated by sex. HB1882 misleadingly refers to trans people here as “members of the opposite sex (HB 1882, 2021);” the accepted term is “sex assigned at birth.”

HB1570, which passed in March 2021, was the most widely publicized of these anti-trans bills, likely because it meant dire consequences for the lives and health of trans youth in the state. This bill, titled “The Arkansas Save Adolescents from Experimentation (SAFE) Act,” or House Bill 1570, restricted access to gender-affirming medical care to minors, even with the consent of a parent (HB 1570, 2021). In the same interview, Benji stated that allowing transgender children access to critical medical care, such as puberty blockers, is lifesaving (this part of his interview did not end up in the final version of the documentary). Cash Ashley, another trans man from Little Rock, testified on March 22, 2021 in front of the Arkansas Senate with this same argument: “if this bill passes, people will die. I wish deeply that this weren’t hyperbole (Arkansas Senate Hearing on HB1570, 2021).” HB1570 did pass in March 2021, making Arkansas the first state to pass a bill this restrictive and in effect making Arkansas the subject of national news headlines, in mainstream and LGBTQ outlets alike. The bill was vetoed by Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson in April 2021; Hutchinson’s rationale was that “the bill is overbroad, extreme, and does not grandfather those young people who are currently under hormone treatment (Froelich 2021).” Governor Hutchinson’s veto was swiftly overridden by Arkansas lawmakers and the bill was then temporarily blocked by a federal judge in June 2021.

A 2019 analysis by the William Institute School of Law of national transgender surveys supports the argument that trans people having access to essential medical care saves lives:

“We found that transgender people who want to have gender-affirming medical care (i.e., hormones and/or surgery) and are able to get it have a lower prevalence of suicide thoughts and attempts... This finding is not surprising given that a thorough review of the 73 extant studies on mental and physical health outcomes for transgender people who have had gender-affirming medical care found that gender-affirming care effectively treats

symptoms of gender dysphoria, improves well-being and quality of life, and reduces suicide risk factors, like depression and substance use, as well as reducing suicidality itself. (Herman et al., 2019).”

As Benji also discussed in part of his first on-camera interview (that did not make it into the final cut of the film) the success of bills such as Arkansas HB1570 is due in large part to egregious misinformation surrounding the narratives behind them; in this case, the false notion that minors would be subjected to genital surgeries unless bills like these prevent it. One effective way to combat this misinformation is through accurate and compassionate representation in mainstream media.

While the presence of transgender characters in mainstream media is not new, early portrayals of transgender characters were exclusively played by cisgender actors, and some even featured the trans character as a villain: in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), for example, the antagonist’s “reveal” as being trans was played as a shocking twist and a mockery designed to make the character disgusting and deceitful (Shadyac 1994). Other films that have attempted to portray trans characters in a positive light, or even have trans characters as their protagonists, still feature cisgender actors in these roles. Some examples are Hilary Swank in *Boys Don’t Cry* (2001), Jared Leto in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), and Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl* (2015). Transgender activists argue that casting cisgender actors in these roles contributes to the long-held and dangerous belief by many that trans people are not “real” men or women. In a 2020 feature by USA Today on heterosexual, cisgender actors playing LGBTQ characters, trans visibility activist Susan Stryker said that “Casting particularly well-known cis actors in trans roles helps perpetuate the idea that transness is a kind of deception and that really underneath it all, we’re really just cis people in drag.” Stryker, Barbara Lee Distinguished Chair in Women’s Leadership at Mills

College in Oakland, California, is transgender (Oliver 2020). Also quoted in the article was Transgender actor Ryan Cassata, who criticized the standard of cisgender actors “[taking] transgender roles away,” especially when trans actors are rarely afforded the opportunity to play cisgender roles (Oliver 2020). One unprecedented exception to this American film industry standard was the 2021 comedy *Together Together*, in which trans actress Patti Harrison plays a cisgender woman who becomes a surrogate mother (Beckwith 2021).

According to the GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) 2021 Studio Responsibility Index, “there were zero transgender or non-binary characters in any theatrical releases from a major studio” in 2021, the fourth year in a row for this finding; in the report, GLAAD states that “this remains one of the more glaring ways mainstream studios continue to lag behind other forms of entertainment media. (GLAAD 2021).” A 2019 survey by GLAAD and Proctor & Gamble (P&G) supported the argument that “non-LGBTQ people who are exposed to LGBTQ media images are more likely to experience increasing levels of acceptance and comfortability towards LGBTQ people (GLAAD and P&G, 2019),” while another 2019 study by the Williams Institute found that cisgender people who are more familiar with transgender people are statistically more supportive of trans rights (Luhur et. al, 2019). This is why accurate transgender representation in media, of actual trans people, is vital, both in fiction and nonfiction work.

As a whole, trans characters being played by cisgender actors appears to be occurring less and less frequently; the most recent portrayal of a trans character by a cisgender actor in a prominent American television show or film was Jeffrey Tambor’s Maura Pfefferman in the Amazon Prime show “Transparent,” which ended in 2019. Arguably one of the most well-known trans actor in mainstream media is *Laverne Cox*, who famously portrayed trans prisoner Sophia

Burset in Netflix's "Orange is the New Black" from 2013-2019. Cox has since played female characters who were not specified as being trans in projects such as "The Mindy Project" (2012-2017) and *Promising Young Woman* (2021). Other trans actors have come out publicly or played characters who came out on screen; 17-year-old actor Isaiah Stannard was originally cast as teenage daughter Sadie Marks in the NBC show *Good Girls* (2018-2021), but Isaiah revealed to producers shortly before filming began that he identified as "he," and the writers of the show included his character's coming out journey as Ben Marks beginning in season two. Elliot Page, who was nominated in 2008 for the Academy Award in Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role, publicly came out as trans in December 2020, and in March 2021 became the first openly trans man to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine (Steinmetz 2021). Other prominent trans actors who have played trans characters in recent successful television shows and films include Hunter Schafer in HBO's "Euphoria," Nicole Maines as the transgender superhero Dreamer on the CW's "Supergirl," and Daniela Vega as the starring role in the Oscar Award-winning film *A Fantastic Woman* (2017).

Fortunately, trans representation in media is not exclusive to fiction television and films, especially "Oscar-bait" films that will most likely only be seen by a specific type of audience member who does not necessarily reflect the average American. For example, "Prideland," a YouTube-based series by PBS Digital Studios, premiered six episodes in 2020 that focused on various LGBTQ-centered topics in the U.S., such as dating while transgender and increasing LGBTQ-focused healthcare in Mississippi. PBS also featured a special called "Growing Up Trans" in 2015 as part of its Frontline documentary series. Platforms like YouTube provide an outlet for LGBTQ people to document their journeys, as Benji discussed in his interview; Benji was able to learn more about being trans because of others who chronicled their transition journeys online.

After the premiere of “Just Benjamin” at Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival (HSDFF) in October 2020, a man who was presumably in his 70s said to Benji “I have a nephew who is going to be my niece, and your story helped me understand hers.” He and another audience member said that the film as a whole, but especially Eric’s interview, might be helpful to other parents with transgender children (or children who elsewhere fit under the LGBTQ umbrella). Benji has since shown the film to family members and said that some of them, who did not initially support Benji after his transition, apologized to him after viewing the documentary. These reactions to the film, albeit anecdotal rather than scientific, indicate some validation of the claim that exposure to media that portrays underrepresented groups in accurate ways is crucial to invoking sympathy and support in those who are not part of those groups.

III. PRODUCTION NARRATIVE

I came up with the idea to make my documentary thesis film centered on the topic of LGBTQ Arkansans when I was living and working in Los Angeles in 2019. I had cycled through a few other topics to use as my thesis from 2016-2019, when I circled back to a story I had been following shortly after getting my Bachelor of Arts in Digital Filmmaking in 2014. At that time, I was working with some former film classmates on a project focused on Lucie’s Place, a Little Rock-based organization whose mission is to assist homeless LGBTQ young adults in Central Arkansas. Lucie’s Place’s founder and executive director at the time, Penelope Poppers, proposed the idea of following some of their residents over the course of a few months as they received support from the organization. This stuck with me, and I pursued this iteration of the film until late 2020. I originally wanted to make a feature-length version of the film, but because of restrictions due to Covid, I decided to produce a short version, which I planned to use as a proof

of concept. I ran into further roadblocks due to lack of a budget and issues with leadership within Lucie's Place at the time. Because of this, I was forced to decide: either widen my topic to any LGBTQ stories in Central Arkansas or find a new subject matter altogether. I decided to stop pursuing Lucie's Place for the time being but still focus my thesis on LGBTQ stories in Central Arkansas and stick with my original format of following three subjects over the course of a few weeks or a few months.

In spring 2021, I filmed an interview with a married couple who live in Bryant, Arkansas. One of the wives, Andrea, is my mother's coworker at Acxiom. She and her wife, Precious, are both black and from small towns in Arkansas. They proved to be extremely compelling and charismatic interview subjects. Shortly after this interview, I told a college friend about my thesis topic and she introduced me to a childhood friend of hers who would eventually become my primary subject, Benjamin Davis (Benji). She had grown up with Benji and as a child knew him as "Cheyenne." Benji and I met two months later over FaceTime, and I was immediately struck by how open he was. At this point, I was still intending to focus on three subjects or pairs of subjects. However, by the time I started filming with Benji, Andrea and Precious were not available to film for the rest of the summer due to personal commitments and I had yet to secure a third story to follow.

The majority of Benji's interview footage that ended up in the final version of the film is from my first interview with Benji in May 2021. Not only was I meeting Benji in person for the first time by showing up to his apartment, I had with me a group of four friends who are just as passionate about filmmaking as I am and were willing to provide their time and equipment to my project at no cost. This initial interview lasted more than an hour, and much like I felt during our FaceTime pre-interview, I was moved by how vulnerable this person was willing to be in front of

a group of strangers, let alone on camera. Benji discussed his life from childhood, around age four, to present day, now close to 30 years old. My friends and I were enthralled by Benji's story, especially his outing in high school, not knowing the term "transgender" until he was in his 20s, being accepted by most members of his military family, and the fact that his father and many of his family members now (mostly) call him by the correct name and pronouns.

When my film was going to be focused on Lucie's Place and some of its residents, my idea for the project was to portray a version of the South and Arkansas that others, especially those who don't live in this region, don't normally consider or expect. I wanted to not just focus on the trauma and struggles of the subjects, but also explore why an LGBTQ person would want to remain in a place like Arkansas, and feature local people and businesses who support those in this community. During the year I lived in Los Angeles and in the year after I returned to Little Rock, I was determined to prove in my film that there are people in the Arkansas LGBTQ community who can't or don't want to leave the state, and there are local people who want to support and protect this community. That was still my intention as I interviewed Andrea and Precious and then conducted the pre-interview with Benji. At first I was disappointed to hear that Benji was planning to move to Colorado; I was sad that he felt he had to leave Arkansas due to safety reasons, but selfishly I also realized Benji's story didn't quite fit into my preconceived idea of what my film would turn out to be (my original title was "Southern Pride"). However, I learned quickly to adapt the film to suit Benji's story. As Benji had plans to move on September 1, his story had a clear timeline.

Shortly before I met and started filming with Benji, I signed up for the inaugural HSDFB Bootcamp, a 10-week workshop led by the festival's executive director Jennifer Gerber. Jennifer allowed and encouraged me to use this bootcamp to workshop my thesis film. I began filming

Benji every few weeks or so depending on his availability, the availability of my crew, and whether Benji had something specific we wanted to cover. As I updated Jennifer and my Bootcamp classmates on my progress, including being temporarily unable to follow up with Andrea and Precious due to their lack of availability, they proposed I focus solely on Benji. I was originally resistant to this idea, as his story would make an interesting contrast to that of Andrea's and Precious's for a number of reasons. However, the more my crew and I filmed with Benji, the easier it became to envision a film that solely focused on him, one that would do his story more justice than what I had originally planned. I ultimately decided to revisit Andrea and Precious's story later and do all of my subjects justice by making separate documentaries.

After I filmed for the first time with Benji, I showed a clip during a session of the Bootcamp. The clip was Benji telling the story of how he was outed as a "lesbian" (when he still presented as female) in high school by an ex-boyfriend. I also included Benji saying that his father had come a long way since that time; he initially disapproved of Benji being a "lesbian" as a teenager, but eventually has started to accept him as a man, as Benji. Jennifer suggested I try to get an interview with Benji's father and/or another of his family members, and the rest of the Bootcamp class agreed. Benji and I were both shocked when his father, Eric Davis, and his stepmother, Becky Davis, agreed to an on-camera interview. Benji told me that while his father was generally accepting and loving towards him, he had never agreed to publicly acknowledge or be involved with his transition until then. At the end of July 2021, I yet again brought my crew of five friends to film a subject (in this case, two) we had never met. Eric and Becky's interview lasted about as long or longer than Benji's initial interview, and much like with Benji, I was touched by how open and emotional they were. I had asked Benji to wait in a separate room during the interview, which meant that Eric and Becky were very personal and vulnerable in

front of a group of essentially strangers. Eric's interview proved to be honest and heartwarming; he was candid about his religion, his feelings of loss after his then-"daughter" came out as trans, and he admitted that he will never be fully comfortable discussing certain "guy things" with Benji. However, none of us expected this traditional, Southern, clean-cut, masculine, former military father to cry on camera talking about how much he loves his son.

After this interview, I had one more month before Benji was set to move to Colorado, in which I filmed sporadic check-ins at Benji's apartment (b-roll of the boxes in his living room, soundbites of him and Chris looking at apartments, etc.) and a going-away party some close friends had planned for him. Moving day was September 1, 2021, and two of my crew members and I filmed Benji and Chris loading their cars and the moving truck, up until Benji driving the truck out of his apartment parking lot. This was the last day of filming, and I had one month to finish post-production before I had to submit the final edit of the film to HSDFF.

I edited a large part of the film myself, but I enlisted two friends to help with b-roll, color correction, and sound editing as well. The film premiered at HSDFF on October 16, 2021 along with six other short films that were made by my classmates in the Bootcamp. Benji attended, along with the rest of my crew. I was pleased that Benji's story seemed to have resonated with these audience members as much as it had with my crew and me. I have since sent a screener link of the film to my contacts at Arkansas PBS, who I worked with this summer as a contractor. In addition to the several national and international film festivals to which I have submitted "Just Benjamin" as of November 2021, I hope to get the film on Arkansas PBS. I also participated in Reel Digital, a 3-week online seminar led by Nicholas Price, Series Producer for PBS's series Reel South, which I will submit "Just Benjamin" for possible inclusion.

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V. APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



To: Paige R Murphy
BELL 4188

From: Chair, Douglas James Adams
IRB Committee

Date: 04/18/2018

Action: **Review Not Required**

Action Date: 04/18/2018

Protocol #: 1803110541

Study Title: Paige Murphy MA documentary thesis film

Please keep this form for your records. Investigators are required to notify the IRB if any changes are made to the referenced study that may change the status of this determination. Please contact your IRB Administrator if you have any questions regarding this determination or future changes to this determination.

APPENDIX B: EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions for Benjamin “Benji” Davis:

1. How did you choose the name “Benjamin”?
2. Can you tell me about your hometown?
3. Are you comfortable telling the story of how you were outed?
4. How is your family now that you’ve transitioned?
5. Can you talk about where you live now and how you ended up here?
6. When are you planning on moving, and why/where?
7. What do you wish that people outside of Arkansas, outside of the South, or even people in the South who don’t know any trans people knew about trans people in the South?
8. What do you like about being trans, or being a part of the LGBTQ community as a whole?
9. Can you talk about your time in the military?
10. Can you talk about having to Google what “transgender” means?
11. What do you like to do for fun?
12. What would you say to trans youth in Arkansas or elsewhere, now that you’re at the point where you are right now?
13. Can you expand on transitioning during the military? Was all of it covered by insurance?
14. How do you feel about laws against trans athletes?
15. How would you touch on your experience with having supportive people in the military compared to others’ experiences?
16. How are non-trans or non-LGBTQ people misled about the bills surrounding trans youth or trans access to bathrooms?
17. What are you looking forward to in moving to Colorado?
18. Can you talk about your religious/spiritual beliefs?

Questions for Eric Davis, Benji’s father:

1. Can you explain your nickname for Benji, “Stub”?
2. Can you talk about your initial reaction to finding out Benji was gay?
3. How have you dealt with discussing Benji with coworkers, friends, or acquaintances?
4. Can you describe what was going through your head when Benji came out to you as trans? Did you see that as a loss?
5. Can you talk about what led you to being more accepting and supportive of Benji being trans?
6. What’s your relationship with Benji like now on a daily basis?
7. How do you feel about Benji moving to Colorado?
8. What might you say to people who might not understand the position that you’re in, being the parent of a trans child? What might you say to appeal to people who don’t fully understand this, even if you don’t fully understand things yourself?
9. Is there anything I didn’t ask that you’d like to address, whether that’s to the film crew or anyone who might be watching the film?

Questions for Becky Davis, Benji’s stepmother:

1. Can you talk about when you became part of the family? Where was Benji at that point?
2. Was it easier for you to accept Benji, coming into his life later into his adulthood?
3. How do you feel about Benji moving to Colorado?
4. Is there anything I didn’t ask that you’d like to address, whether that’s to the film crew or anyone who might be watching the film?

Questions for Britni Padilla-Dumas, Benji’s best friend, mentor, and former roommate:

1. What is your relationship to Benji?
2. How do you feel about Benji moving to Colorado?

APPENDIX C: SCRIPT

Writer/Producer: Paige Murphy	Graduation Date: December 2021
Final runtime: 24 mins	Status: Complete
Version: Final	Revised: n/a

**Production notes: “Just Benjamin” defend November 2021. The University of Arkansas
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Just Benjamin

by

Paige Murphy

Paige Murphy
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EXT. APARTMENT

We see the outside of a yellow-brick apartment building with a dark blue. TEXT: "LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS, JUNE 2021"

BENJI (O.S.)
So, today is shot day.

INT. BENJI'S APARTMENT

BENJAMIN "BENJI" DAVIS sits on a tan armchair in his apartment living room. He bends down, rifling through something off-camera. He sits up, pulling boxes of Testosterone briefly into view.

BENJI (CONT'D)
Which means I get to inject myself with some testosterone here. I picked a hell of a life for someone who does not like needles.

Benji's dog, Tucker, lays on the floor of Benji's apartment with his front paws crossed, and looks off-camera.

In a wide shot, Benji pinches the skin on the right side of his stomach. He sticks the capped tip of a syringe in his mouth and with his left hand, pulls the needle out and prepares to inject himself.

TEXT: "BENJAMIN 'BENJI' DAVIS"

BENJI
And so, to prevent it from hurting less, I just pinch the fat. I wait a minute and I'll count to myself. And then you just... stab.

Benji sticks the needle into his skin and pushes down on the plunger.

BENJI
And with T, you have to go a little bit slower than you would other stuff. And you can slowly start to release.

BENJI (O.S.)

My name is Benjamin Cooper Davis, and I am
a 29-year-old transgender male.

INT. BENJI'S APARTMENT - DIFFERENT DAY

In a medium shot, Benji sits in a blue chair in his apartment
facing left of frame.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I actually changed my name legally in 2019,
and I think I was just shy of turning 28.

Graphic: Photo of Benji smiling while holding a piece of paper
that is titled "Order for Change of Name and Gender."

BENJI

I was trying out different names.

B-roll of Benji standing outside of a house with his friends
BRITNI and KELSEY.

BENJI (O.S.)

And when I lived with my former
roommates Britni and Kelsey, I got in
trouble one time.

Graphic: Photo of Benji smiling with Kelsey.

BENJI (O.S.)

And all the sudden I just hear
"Benjamin Cooper Davis"-

Graphic: Photo of Benji smiling with Britni.

BENJI (CONT'D)

--echoing down the hallway from Kelsey,
and that has been my name since.

INT. BENJI'S APARTMENT (CONT'D)

Benji injects the last of the testosterone.

BENJI

Once you've got it all in, I typically
let go and I'll hold it there for a

minute because T likes to come back out.
And then you just pull it out.

Benji slowly takes the needle out and caps it.

BENJI (O.S.)
I still go by old name, which-- technically we call
it a dead name. Just because I have a lot of
attachment to it.

Benji sanitizes the injection spot.

INT. BENJI'S APARTMENT - DIFFERENT DAY (CONT'D)

BENJI (CONT'D)
So my family and some friends will
still call me Chey or Cheyenne, some
call me Cooper, and some call me Benji.

INT. BENJI'S APARTMENT (CONT'D)

Benji sits back up in the chair and gestures to his stomach, now
covered by his shirt.

BENJI
And that's all you do. Every week.
It's a good time.

TEXT: "JUST BENJAMIN" FADE TO BLACK WITH TITLE STILL ON SCREEN.

Light instrumental music begins.

Title fades.

INT. BENJI'S APARTMENT - THIRD SETUP

In a MS, Benji sits in a different spot in his living room than
in the previous shots, this time in a rocking chair.

BENJI
I am from a very small town called Friendship,
Arkansas.

Driving shot on a highway passing Exit 83/Friendship.
Cut to Camera B of Benji in the rocking chair.

BENJI (CONT'D)

Growing up there, I was not exposed to a lot of the world. It's kind of like a closeted town.

B-roll of the trans and pansexual pride flags hanging from Benji's balcony.

Back to Benji in rocking chair.

BENJI (CONT'D) I was one of those that listened in the background and could hear inappropriate jokes about my community. I didn't know much outside of that. I was definitely ignorant once I turned 18, graduated, and finally got away from there.

Drone shot of bridge in downtown Little Rock at night.

BENJI (O.S.)

Little Rock isn't exactly the most progressive, but it is definitely more progressive than I'm used to.

B-roll of Benji in low CU working at a restaurant.

BENJI (O.S.)

I still don't necessarily go out all of the time, and if I do--

B-roll of Benji sitting at a table outside with friends.

Cut to Camera B.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I try my best to just-

B-roll of Benji swaying in a hammock.

BENJI (O.S.)

-stay small and in the corner.

B-roll of armchair with boxes and other household items.

BENJI (O.S.)

I randomly got a wild hair about two years ago--

B-roll of Benji in WS moving boxes around by couch.

BENJI (O.S.)
 --and decided that I would save up and
 leave Arkansas. And I've always wanted to
 live in Colorado.

Cut to Camera B.

BENJI (CONT'D)
 Even just vacationing, the atmosphere I
 felt... I felt relieved.

B-roll of another man, CHRIS B., sitting on the floor of
 Benji's living room. Benji walks into frame.

TEXT: "CHRIS B., BENJI'S BROTHER AND ROOMMATE."

BENJI (O.S.)
 So, my brother and I will be moving to
 Aurora, Colorado after saving up for the
 last year.

Cut to Camera B.

BENJI (CONT'D)
 We are moving more to live freely and
 for our safety. Arkansas--

Drone shot of flags outside Arkansas State Capitol.

BENJI (O.S.)
 --we thought would do better.

Graphic: Online news article with headline "Arkansas becomes
 first state to outlaw gender-affirming treatment for trans
 youth."

BENJI (O.S.)
 And this last year has proven that
 they probably won't.

Graphic: Online news article with headline "Arkansas passes
 bill to ban gender-affirming care for trans youth."

Back to Benji.

BENJI (CONT'D)

And so we don't--we don't want to have to live in fear. We don't want to have to worry about going out with our friends--

B-roll of Benji and Chris sitting with friends.

BENJI (O.S.)

--or going to eat, or going to a grocery store, or even, you know, just going to get gas. Because these are things that I think about as far as my safety goes.

B-roll of plant by window.

Cut to WS of Benji and Chris sitting in armchairs in living room. Both are looking at laptop screens.

BENJI

House for rent. One bedroom. \$895.

Chris looks over to Benji.

CHRIS

Is it legitimate?

B-roll of duffel bags, boxes, kitchen items, etc.

CHRIS (O.S.)

Never heard of a one-bedroom house. They're probably renting a bedroom *in* their house. That's what I've found most of those are.

CU/POV of Benji looking at laptop screen.

BENJI (O.S.)

I thought I was just like my cousins, you know, my brothers, my dad, my uncle.

INT. BENJI'S CAR

CU of Benji driving.

BENJI (CONT'D)

And I had to wear dresses to church, and skirts, and different kinds of clothes. Fix my hair and just-- (makes sound of disgust)

Graphic: Photo of Benji as a toddler wearing beaded necklaces.

Cut back to Benji in car.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I can remember wearing certain clothes and always complaining and saying they were itchy. Just because I hated the way I felt in the clothes and the fabric against my skin.

INT. ERIC AND BECKY DAVIS'S HOUSE

MS of ERIC AND BECKY DAVIS sitting in their kitchen.

TEXT: "ERIC AND BECKY DAVIS, BENJI'S DAD AND STEPMOM"

ERIC

I think as a parent, I think you, you notice things early on. Uh--

Cut to CU of Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)

Unfortunately, her mother and I-- *his* mother and I--and I still get that confused.

Graphic: Photo of young Eric holding baby Benji.

ERIC (O.S.)

His mother and I divorced...

Graphic: Photo of Benji as a toddler.

Graphic: Photo of Benji as a toddler next to a puppy.

ERIC (O.S.)

Benji was probably eighteen months.

Cut to MS of Eric and Becky.

ERIC (CONT'D)

As he progressed in age, probably
around age four or five, there wasn't the
same comfort--

Graphic: Photo of Benji as a child, smiling.

ERIC (O.S.)

--as identifying with other little
girls--

Graphic: Photo of Benji as a child with long hair and bangs.

ERIC (O.S.)

--being all frilly and frou-frou.

Graphic: Photo of Eric, Benji, and Benji's toddler brother
standing by a pickup truck. Eric holds a fish they've caught.

ERIC (O.S.)

Benji's comfort was in blue jeans--

Graphic: Photo of Benji a few years older, with long hair in a
ponytail and wearing a plaid shirt and blue jeans.

ERIC (O.S.)

--and boots, and long-sleeve shirts.

Cut to CU of Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)

I could see a trend even more moving
into the preteen years in the way
started dressing--

Graphic: Photo of Benji as a teenager.

ERIC (O.S.)

--and just actions.

Graphic: Photo of teenage Benji in a basketball uniform.

ERIC (O.S.)

--and just tomboyish.

Cut to MS of Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)

In March of Benji's senior year-- I believe it was March or April, that's when Benji actually said to me--

Graphic: Photo of Eric and Benji with much shorter hair, still pre-transition.

ERIC (O.S.)
--then it was still Chey, you know,
'Dad, I'm gay.'

INT. BENJI'S APARTMENT Back to

Camera A of Benji.

BENJI
I realized from a very young age, probably around four or five, that I was definitely different.

Graphic: Benji as a child, close to age four or five.

BENJI (O.S.)
I loved differently, I guess is how I would explain it.

CU of present-day Benji lifting a barbell.

BENJI (O.S.)
And so I grew up pretending to be a girl.

Cut to Camera A.

BENJI (CONT'D)
My town outed me before I got the chance to out myself.

Graphic: photo of teenage Benji in athletic wear.

Graphic: photo of teenage Benji smiling and holding a cell phone.

BENJI (O.S.)
I had my first girlfriend in high school.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I had an ex-boyfriend who I pretended to date for a little while who did not like the fact that I had a girlfriend and that I left him for a girl.

BENJI (CONT'D)

We were riding home from a basketball game one night on the bus and we were just holding hands.

BENJI (CONT'D)

He did not like that. And so when we got to school the next morning, we both were called into the principal's office and essentially told that our behavior was inappropriate.

BENJI (CONT'D)

And at this point, my heart was in my feet.

BENJI (CONT'D)

Our parents were called to the school.

BENJI (CONT'D)

And my dad called my mother, and we had to have a conversation about how me being--

Benji makes quotation gestures with his fingers.

BENJI (CONT'D)

--a "lesbian" was inappropriate and not something our family would tolerate.

Cut to Camera B.

BENJI (CONT'D)

So, yes. I was outed by somebody I went to school with. For holding my girlfriend's hand on the bus.

Cut to CU of Benji swaying in hammock.

Somber instrumental score continues.

Cut to Camera A.

BENJI (CONT'D)
I just felt like I didn't belong, like a
ghost. I kinda just floated there--

BENJI (CONT'D)
--for however many years until I
turned 18.

Graphic: Eric with Benji, who is in a U.S. Army uniform.

BENJI (O.S.)
I had a friend who talked me into
joining the Army National Guard.

Graphic: Photo of Benji posing back-to-back with another
soldier, both of them in uniform.

Graphic: Photo of Benji sitting next to two other soldiers.

BENJI (O.S.)
She and I actually both enlisted, as I
was female at the time, as 91 Bravos,
which are all-wheel vehicle mechanics. I
served for six and a half years.

Cut to Camera A.

BENJI (CONT'D) I was
actually hurt in Fort Hood before the
deployment and begged to go--

Graphic: Photo of Benji laying in a hospital bed next to a
medical professional, both with their thumbs up.

BENJI (O.S.)
--which I should've known better.

Cut to Camera A.

BENJI (CONT'D)
I still have friends, being out now,
that I can call.

Graphic: Photo of Benji with other female soldiers, all in
uniform.

BENJI (O.S.)

We're all still close, which I'll definitely miss when I leave.

BENJI (CONT'D)

And I was never treated differently. Even presenting as female during my service--

Graphic: Photo of Benji in uniform.

BENJI (O.S.)

--I was still "one of the guys."

Graphic: Photo of Benji in uniform, with a helmet, sunglasses, and backpack.

BENJI (O.S.) Unfortunately, that wasn't the case for everybody. And so I did suffer some military trauma due to that.

BENJI (CONT'D)

But, it helped shaped me and make me better--

Graphic: Photo of Benji with another female soldier, both holding their arms up in a strength pose.

BENJI (O.S.)

--and it definitely helped with my transition. It made me realize that you can get through just about anything.

BENJI (CONT'D)

Towards the end of my service, around September of 2017, is actually when the first go-around trans military were allowed to serve.

Graphic: Photo of Benji in uniform.

BENJI (O.S.)

I actually pulled some of the guys aside and told them, 'hey, I'm trans.'

Graphic: Photo of Benji posing with fellow soldiers.

BENJI (O.S.)

And they actually took it better than I thought. And of course, I did lose some friends, but you're going to.

Graphic: Photo of Benji in uniform with a little girl on his back.

BENJI (O.S.)

But yeah, so, for six and a half years, I came out as a lesbian in the military.

Graphic: Photo of Benji in uniform hugging a little girl.

BENJI (O.S.)

Once that Don't Ask, Don't Tell repealed in 2011, and I came out as trans-

Graphic: Benji in uniform, pointing to his nametag.

BENJI (O.S.)

--once trans were allowed to serve.

Cut to Camera A.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I hadn't hormonally transitioned yet, but the guys that I served with were very encouraging. They were also very protective.

Graphic: Group photo of Benji with six other male and female soldiers.

BENJI (O.S.)

So I was fortunate enough to literally have an army behind me.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I just felt, for the first time, that I was seen.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I was still actively serving. I was openly transitioning. And I was just, I was myself.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I didn't have to be you know, the person that I was pretending to be my entire life. I finally got to come out and put her to rest.

Graphic: Professional photo of Benji after starting his transition, smiling.

Cut to Camera A.

BENJI

So, I did not actually always know what being trans was or what transgender meant.

Graphic: Screen recording of typing in a google search the words "I'm female but I feel like a boy."

BENJI (O.S.)

In about 2014 or 2015, I actually googled, you know, what it meant to be female but feel like a boy.

Graphic: Screen recording of google search results.

BENJI (O.S.)

And of course all of this stuff started popping up. But mostly YouTube videos of other trans men or women who had been transitioning for years.

BENJI (CONT'D)

All I could picture on myself was a beard.

BENJI (CONT'D)

At the time I was married.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I had mentioned feeling this way to her exact response--

BENJI (CONT'D)

--was "I already left my husband for a woman. I will not be married to a freak."

BENJI (CONT'D)

And so I kind of just suppressed it for a little while. But luckily, my deployment was coming up. And of course we got separated and divorced on my deployment.

BENJI (CONT'D)

And so once I came home, I was like "all right, this is my chance."

BENJI (CONT'D)

I was fortunate enough to where I could receive care from the V.A. And so my transition went a little bit faster than others'.

BENJI (CONT'D)

It all started in 2014 with one google search.

Graphic: Collage of nine photos chronicling the stages of Benji's transition.

BENJI (O.S.)

Here we are in 2021, and bam.

Graphic: Photo of Benji as a toddler, smiling in the bathtub.

Graphic: Photo of young Eric holding newborn Benji.

BENJI (O.S.)

On my dad's side, I was his only daughter.

Graphic: Photo of Eric posing with Benji in uniform.

Cut to Camera A. Benji makes air quotations with his fingers.

BENJI (CONT'D)

Well in his- "born." female. And so in his eyes, I was his only daughter, even though I've always been this person. So

he definitely took it the hardest. But he has come a very long way now. He is very supportive. He accepts me.

B-roll of Benji sitting on porch with Becky.

BENJI (O.S.)

My stepmom actually had a really big hand in that. She is one of those that--

Cut to Camera A.

BENJI (CONT'D)

--"love is love" regardless.

B-roll of Eric and Becky in their kitchen.

BENJI (O.S.)

And so she really helped him realize that I am still me. I am happy--

Graphic: Photo of Benji post-transition, smiling.

BENJI (O.S.)

--and I'm healthy. And the only difference is now I just look like myself.

Cut to Camera A.

BENJI (CONT'D)

As far as my mother, I do not call her mom. I actually use her name. Growing up, she just--she was never really there, so I don't take her opinion into account. The last thing she said to me that really just was the icing on the cake was that I was her freak daughter pretending to be her son.

Graphic: Photo of Benji as a child, smiling.

B-roll of Benji and Eric fishing.

BENJI (O.S.)

I just, you know, hang out with my dad
and them--

B-roll of Benji reeling line in.

BENJI (O.S.)
I'm just one of the guys, one of the
boys.

BENJI (CONT'D)
I'm not looked at differently anymore. And
it's nice to be able to feel like when you
walk in the house--

B-roll of Benji with Eric and Becky in their kitchen.

BENJI (O.S.)
--that you belong. Because, I mean, it is
your family. And that you can breathe.
Instead of just floating there--

BENJI (CONT'D) --like
you're nothing.

INT. BENJI'S CAR

B-roll CU of Benji driving.

BENJI (O.S.)
We're actually going to go down to see my
dad and my mom.

Drone shot of a field and trees.

BENJI (O.S.)
I call her mom. "Mama Bear." We're
actually gonna go down and see them
and interview them about my life
before, my life now--

B-roll POV CU of Benji driving.

BENJI (O.S.)

--get their feelings on it. And I'm kind of nervous about it, but in a good way.

Drone shot of trees near Eric & Becky's house.

BENJI (O.S.)

They've always, you know, loved me, and acknowledged who I am and my identity.

B-roll of Benji's hand on steering wheel.

BENJI (O.S.)

But they've never really done anything like this--

B-roll of Benji's eyes in rearview mirror.

BENJI (O.S.)

--as far as getting involved with my transition.

B-roll of driving on highway, following a semi-truck.

BENJI (O.S.)

And so that's what I'm excited about. I don't know. It's radiating right now.

Cut to CU of Benji driving.

BENJI

We are about 10 minutes away.

Drone shot of Eric & Becky's house.

TEXT: "ARKADELPHIA, ARKANSAS."

BENJI (O.S.)

And I can definitely feel it in my chest.

WS of Benji's car pulling into driveway.

Establishing shot of house.

WS cat turns around and meows at the camera.

WS from a distance: Benji waits at the door, then walks inside out of view.

B-roll of Benji, Eric, and Becky sitting on porch and BTS of crew setting up the interview.

ERIC (O.S.)
Well, as far as disowning or having a
blowup fight--

MS of Eric and Becky.

ERIC (CONT'D)
--or argument or anything like that-

WS of Eric, Becky, and Benji in kitchen.

ERIC (O.S.)
--we never really had one. We have had
several conversations over the years.

WS Eric on the porch looking off-screen.

ERIC (O.S.)
And it was always phone conversation. We
never had a sit-down face-to-face.

CU Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)
The end of every conversation has
always been, "I'm gonna love and
support you, no matter what."

B-roll of plant on porch.

ERIC (O.S.)
When Benji came out to me as trans, it
was--

MS Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)
I'm not gonna say it was comfortable.

MWS Eric and Becky.

ERIC (CONT'D)

But when I heard that, you know--

B-roll of a statue of a girl on the Davis property.

ERIC (O.S.)

--my daughter is telling me--

MS Eric and Becky.

ERIC (CONT'D)

--"Hey, dad--"

ERIC (CONT'D)

--"I feel more comfortable being a boy."

ERIC (CONT'D)

I would say that that's whenever that I felt like I lost my baby girl.

Drone shot of trees by lake.

ERIC (O.S.)

I think as a parent, it's a defense mechanism, too--

CU Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)

--that sometimes gets categorized as a prejudice. You don't want your child to be different. Or you don't want your child to be judged.

Drone shot above house of Benji and Eric walking to lake to fish.

ERIC (O.S.)

My biggest concern was, you feel out of place anyway. But, you know, you're moving to what makes you feel the most comfortable--

MS Eric and Becky.

ERIC (CONT'D)

--but you're isolating yourself more and more with each move you make from what the "norm" is--

Eric makes air quotations with his fingers.

ERIC (CONT'D)
--especially in the south.

ERIC (CONT'D)
It's like I've always tried to express to
Benji--

WS Benji and Eric fishing at lake.

ERIC (O.S.)
--and reinforce. I'm not gonna judge
you. You're my child--

CU Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)
--and I love my child.

MS Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)
I'm not gonna say that there wasn't a
hope that this was a phase--

CU Eric reeling in fishing line.

ERIC (O.S.)
--that then your child will live
through this period of time in their
life--

Drone shot across lake of Benji and Eric fishing.

ERIC (O.S.)
--and have an experience with this-

MS Eric and Becky.

ERIC (CONT'D)
--and one day decide that, "hey I'm
gonna be 'normal.'"

Eric makes air quotations with his fingers again.

WS Benji and Eric fishing.

ERIC (O.S.)
You know, and I think that's part of
the stereotype--

MS from behind Eric as he catches a fish.

ERIC (O.S.)
--you know, when I say that, I'm not
going to say that I don't have guilt
when I make that statement.

CU Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D) Because
he is normal.

ERIC (CONT'D)
We want normal for our children.

B-roll of framed pictures of Eric and Becky's grandchildren.

MS Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)
I've been steadily conditioning myself to
just let Benji be Benji and love Benji,
and that's my job. My job's not to try to
change--

ERIC (CONT'D)
--him into something that he's not
comfortable with.

CU Becky, who is nodding.

MS Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)
My job's not to, you know, religiously
condone and bash and make Benji feel
isolated more. My job's to love Benji.
That's my child.

MS Eric and Becky.

BECKY

I knew of Eric anyway, and his family.

Graphic: Photo of Benji, Eric, and Becky posing with one of Benji's siblings and their family.

BECKY (O.S.)

So I don't remember there being this big conversation when we were dating about--

CU Becky.

BECKY (CONT'D)

--"hey, I have three children," you know. I'm sure he--

CU Eric.

ERIC Just

told you.

BECKY (O.S.)

--just said, "my daughter-

CU Becky.

BECKY (CONT'D)

--is- now- wants to be trans."

B-roll of sign above door that says "Davis, est. 2019." MS

Eric and Becky.

BECKY (CONT'D)

I don't remember it being just because I really already knew about it. I have two grown kids about the same age as Eric's kids, and, you know, through all of our Benji discussions, I always just try to relate it back to the way I would feel if it were one of my--my Morgan or Logan.

CU Eric.

BECKY (O.S.)

And the bottom line would just be
love.

Eric nods in agreement.

BECKY (O.S.)
You love them all the time--

MS Eric and Becky.

BECKY (CONT'D)
--no matter what.

CU Becky.

BECKY
I think I have this, what I feel like is
a pretty cool relationship with Benji.

WS of Benji and Becky sitting and talking on porch.

BECKY (O.S.)
I just get to be the bonus mom.

CU Becky.

BECKY (CONT'D)
He had lived with us for a month last
year, and so I think we became a lot
closer then because he was here in the
house with us for a long time.

WS Benji, Becky, and Eric sitting and talking on porch.

BECKY (O.S.)
And we sat out on the porch and drank
coffee together.

MS Eric and Becky.

BECKY (CONT'D)
He trusts me, and texts me-

B-roll of decorative sign that says "live simply."

BECKY (O.S.)
--if he's struggling in any way.

MS Becky.

BECKY (CONT'D)
And so, I'm thankful for that.

CU Eric.

ERIC
Just because how we're conditioned,
we're taught that it's a choice.

B-roll of plants outside house.

ERIC (O.S.)
When on the flip side of it-

CU Eric.

ERIC (CONT'D)
--Benji feels like he's born this way.

MS Eric and Becky.

ERIC (CONT'D)
So it's not a choice that Benji made,
this is who Benji has always been.

Drone shot of Eric and Benji fishing.

ERIC (O.S.)
Who am I to say that-

MS Benji's tattooed arm as he fishes.

ERIC (O.S.)
--you know, you're wrong?

WS Eric, Benji, and Becky in kitchen.

BECKY (O.S.)
One thing that I think we just keep
going back to is we just want him to be
happy.

MS Eric and Becky.

BECKY (CONT'D)

I always say three things a lot, and
it's "be good, do good, and, you now,
we'll always love you."

B-roll of decorative signs that say "choose happiness" and
"love abundantly." CU

Eric.

ERIC
My religious beliefs compared to how I
feel about Benji--

Eric stops talking and gets emotional. After a pause, he wipes
away a tear.

ERIC (CONT'D)
That's what bothers me the most.

Beat.

ERIC (CONT'D)
I mean, I was raised, you know-- "sin is
sin," and all this and all that. But with
all that said, none of us are any
different than one another--

MS Eric and Becky. Becky is also emotional.

ERIC (CONT'D)
--that the same person died-

CU bird house with a cross.

MS Eric and Becky.

ERIC (CONT'D)
--for all of us. That's what my love's
based on.

Beat.

MS of Benji embracing Becky, then Eric on porch as he says
goodbye.

ERIC (O.S.)
That's what my non-judgmental love is
based on.

Light-hearted instrumental music starts as Eric and Becky wave outside their house in a WS.

Benji's car drives down their gravel driveway.

EXT. BRITNI AND KELSEY'S HOUSE

BENJI (O.S.)

We're down to 11 days before moving. And so it's kinda like this last week or so will just be a whole bunch of goodbyes.

MS Benji in his friends' backyard.

BENJI

I am at my friend Britni and Kelsey's. This is actually where I lived before I moved in with Chris. And they are throwing us a going away party.

Moving b-roll shots of party decor.

BENJI (O.S.)

It is Harry Potter-themed, so I am dressed like a Gryffindor person.

MS of Benji's Gryffindor socks and color-coordinated shoes.

MS pan of Benji and Chris sitting at a table as Chris laughs and holds a drink.

BENJI (O.S.)

And our friends were all invited to come and see us.

MS Britni. TEXT: "BRITNI PADILLA-DUMAS, BENJI'S BEST FRIEND."

BRITNI

A lot of us here in Arkansas are going to miss them, wanted to wish them well. And so what better way than to get together, hang out, have some drinks, some food, and share love?

B-roll of cupcakes.

BRITNI

He's like my bro, like my little bro.
But also, I'm kind of a mentor in his
life.

B-roll of Benji sitting at table with friends.

MS Benji.

BENJI

I was here for a year, and I was
involved in everything. Like, we had
family brunches, we would have family
days out--

B-roll of Benji and friends eating and talking at table.

Graphic: photo of Benji with Britni.

Graphic: photo of Benji with Britni and Kelsey's son.

Graphic: photo of Benji with Britni.

BENJI (O.S.)

--we would just have family days, and I
was included in those and in holidays. And
so it's sad because... I'm 14 hours away
so I have to come and visit. Versus being
10 minutes away.

B-roll of raindrops in backyard.

MS Britni.

BRITNI

He asked me if I was sad about him
leaving, and of course, yes. I'm sad
he's not going to be 15 minutes away.

Graphic: photos of Benji with Britni and Kelsey.

B-roll of Benji with Britni.

BRITNI (O.S.)

We've known each other for almost 10 years now. But at the same time, I'm really excited for him to go to Colorado, to get out of Arkansas. He has a lot of history here, a lot of past here--

MS Britni.

BRITNI (CONT'D)

--and I think it's going to be really good for him to leave that behind and start fresh there.

Graphic: photo montage of Benji with various friends.

BRITNI (O.S.)

So, I'm just incredibly proud of the work he has put into himself to grow and to be just a better human in general.

INT. BENJI'S APARTMENT MS

Benji.

BENJI

It's Sunday, August the 29th and we are about--what is it--three days now?

Benji turns to his right and looks off-screen at Chris.

CHRIS (O.S.)

Yeah, about three days from moving.

BENJI

Three days from moving to Colorado.

B-roll of moving clutter in kitchen/living room.

BENJI (O.S.)

And I am nervous. I don't know about you.

CHRIS (O.S.) I'm

terrified.

B-roll of boxes stacked on top of each other.

CHRIS (O.S.)

This is my O.G. cactus. I've had this
for five years.

Chris holds up a mini cactus in a pot and puts it into a box.

CHRIS (O.S.)

It's almost died several times. I don't
know how I've brought it back so many
times.

B-roll of moving clutter in living room.

BENJI (O.S.)

It's a good start. It's a fresh start.
It's something I've been looking forward
to.

MS Chris.

CHRIS

That's what it feels like. It feels
like a clean slate.

B-roll of kitchen.

MS Chris.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

It's a lot of work to get there. There's
still a lot of work left to do. But it's
gonna be worth it when we get there, and
it's like starting over.

INT./EXT. BENJI'S APARTMENT - MOVING DAY

B-roll shots of Benji and Chris taking items out of apartment,
empty living room, and September 2021 calendar.

BENJI (O.S.)

Today is Wednesday, September the 1st,
and today is the day that we are actually
leaving Arkansas and moving to Colorado.

MS Benji interspersed with more b-roll shots of household items, Benji and Chris walking out of apartment and loading items into moving truck.

BENJI (CONT'D)

I have a lot of mixed emotions. My parents actually came up last night and bought us dinner and sat with us for a little while. And it was weird to say instead of like "I'll see you later" or "I'll see you in a few months," "I'll see you when I see you." A couple of friends came, so that was nice. I'm ready for different weather. It's hot.

CHRIS (O.S.)

I mean, this is the second time I've picked up and moved, because I was like, "eff it, I'm out of here."

BENJI (O.S.)

There you go. Well good, you have some experience.

MS Benji.

BENJI (CONT'D)

You can guide me on this endeavor.

Benji laughs.

B-roll WS of Benji closing back of moving truck.

CHRIS (O.S.) Pick a bomb playlist.

BENJI (O.S.) Aw, man.

Benji walks out of his apartment for the last time and closes the door.

CHRIS (O.S.)

Because you are going to be in your feels when you drive away.

BENJI (O.S.)

Passing through all the different
states.

B-roll shots of Benji driving moving truck, pan shot from inside
car of driving on highway.

BENJI (O.S.)

It's something I've wanted to do my
entire life and I've finally grown up and
I'm gonna make myself do it. I wanna go
somewhere where I can just be me.

CU Benji driving.

BENJI (O.S.)

I simply want to be Benjamin.

TEXT: "JUST BENJAMIN" over a black screen.

END CREDITS