

Kelly Loves Tony

Spencer Nakasako

57 minutes, color, video, 1998

NAATA

Description

The documentary opens with background information on its characters, displayed simply as text on the screen. The text says that their families come from the Iu Mien tribe, recruited by the CIA to wage a secret war against the Communists during the Vietnam war. After the retreat of the U.S., the Mien people are left to face the reprisal of the Communists or to flee. Kelly Saeteurn has never seen Laos; she was born in a Thai refugee camp and, when she was three years old, her family was relocated to Richmond, CA. The text concludes that at Kelly's graduation from high school, she and her boyfriend, Tony Saelio, a Laotian immigrant, were given a camcorder to record her last year and a half as a teenager.

The camera is turned on at an exuberant graduation scene with balloons, noisy girls, and flowers. We meet Kelly in a close-up, as she happily poses with her girlfriends from school and kisses the camera, which Tony is holding, at his instruction. The camera then follows her around the school yard, while she and her boyfriend chat and laugh, until she says that she is becoming camera shy.

In the next sequence, Kelly is sitting against the plain background of her room's wall and telling her story. In a cheerful tone, she announces that she is engaged to be married and that last June she graduated from high school with honors. I wanted to achieve more than a diploma, she says and explains that she worked hard for that. Kelly shares that she now wants to go to college and achieve more in life. It is not clear whether Tony is filming or Kelly is addressing the camera alone.

We are next taken to Tony's car, driving on a highway. Tony asks Kelly questions from behind the camera. She recalls that they met at the mall, and that Tony considered himself a Mac-daddy and talked to her like that but she thought he was just a player. She stares out the window and shyly avoids the camera's eye when he tells her that he liked her the very first time they met.

The camera cuts back to the close-up of Kelly telling their story. She summarizes how they met in the beginning of her senior year, how she was interested in Tony but knew from others that he was a gang member and felt insecure about that, and how their relationship started off really well. Three months later, she was pregnant, Kelly says. In a slow-motion sequence, the camera shows us the couple, Tony facing the camera and holding Kelly in his arms, as if dancing. He then slowly turns her toward the camera at an angle that shows she is pregnant. Back in the close-up, in a voice that contradicts her words, Kelly says that there's no regret but there's regret in maybe the time of her pregnancy because she wanted to go to college and achieve more in life. But it happened, I can't change the past, but I can always change the future, she says as she avoids the camera in search of words and stammers through her statements.

Next we see Tony trying to film himself filming in front of a mirror. This shot will become more meaningful later in the documentary, as there will be one single shot in which the two protagonists will address the camera together. Throughout the documentary, one of them is always filming and speaking off-camera.

We follow the couple to a clinic, where they listen to their baby's heartbeat, and later to the hospital where Kelly, going in labor, desperately looks for an entrance. While she looks in pain and annoyed by the camera, Tony continues filming as he follows her. This will be the only time when we see one of them disturbed by the intrusion of the camera in a personal and emotional moment; otherwise, they are comfortable being followed by and addressing the camera.

The camera takes us to the happy commotion in Kelly's hospital room after the birth of baby Andrew. Kelly holds her baby as she talks to her mother and refuses to drink the Thai tea she has brought. Tony jokes, She's stubborn, huh? but we do not see his face, as he is behind the camera. Kelly takes the opportunity from the traditional Thai tea to explain, in a voice-over, that the Mien people have many traditions; for instance, one day she came back from school and her mom and Tony told her she was already engaged to him.

Kelly films her family and tells its story in a meditative voice-over. When I was growing up, I always thought that my life would be different than my mom's, she says. Her mom was a young bride, too, married at sixteen. The camera focuses on a picture of a group of young women in traditional dress and scans the photo, as if trying to distinguish which girl is mom. Then it focuses on a black-and-white picture of Kelly's dad, almost a schoolboy, in a tight close-up. The camera focuses on the photo, slightly jittery, as Kelly tells us that he died because of the war. We then glance over Kelly's seven siblings, helping their mom prepare traditional food or simply babysitting. Finally, we get our first detailed view of Tony, a buff, tattooed young man absorbed in the task of bathing the baby. Kelly's tone reveals sadness as she tells us that while she was pregnant, he moved in with them so that we could be together like a real family.

Tony almost interrogates Kelly from behind the camera, asking how she feels as a mother. It is a lot of responsibility, she says, taking care of your son. To illustrate, the camera alternates between the two of them filming daily cares for their baby.

Tony takes us through his daily work routine, explaining that he now has a family to support my lady, my son Andrew that's a big responsibility and sounding like a diligent echo of Kelly's words. He works for the East Bay Asian Youth Center, driving kids to school and helping out around the office. His boss films him sweeping the floor nonchalantly and tells us, in a friendly but somewhat detached tone, that Tony does his job and doesn't steal, but has a big challenge in the courts: the INS wants to deport him because of his criminal record. We are introduced to the details of Tony's gang-member past, from his supervisor's point of view, when the supervisor says that the Youth Center is helping Tony by explaining to him the legal issues so that he knows what's going on. He can be deported for offenses like car theft, bearing firearms, and robbery. The camera then cuts back to Tony's routine, driving back home. The juxtaposition equates the legal problems with his daily life. On the way, we meet his former friends hanging out in the street, putting graffiti on the walls. Matter-of-factly, Tony says that he used to hang out with them, fight, and stay in the streets.

Back home, he finds Kelly asleep and in a whisper tells us that she is his lady, his dream lady. In the next shot, though, he has to face her in a close-up, as she throws accusations at him while holding the baby. Why was he getting in trouble, she demands to know, because he liked being in and out of jail? To his feeble attempts to say that that is in his past, she says that the INS is now

using it against him. What would happen to us?, Kelly wants to know, and we leave her without an answer to cut to the next sequence.

Kelly addresses the camera alone in their room. Sitting on the floor, she cries in to a large towel and shuts the door on a little brother who tries to come in. She has one moving statement to make: she is scared.

The families come together for Tonys court hearing. As they gather in the court hallways, in a brooding voice-over, Kelly narrates that they were all nervous and did not know what was going on. The voice-over continues as we see Kelly sit down on a bench in the halls and listen attentively to a woman. One of Tonys attorneys took the time to explain to Kelly that he has a better chance because of her and Andrew and because he has not committed any crimes in the past couple of years. At the hearing, the judge decides to wait and see his performance before the final ruling. In the courtroom, half of the cameras view is taken up by Kellys profile, a desolate look on her face. So now all we can do is wait, she concludes.

One month later, Kelly and Tony are buying a bed in a furniture store, playfully trying beds out. Kelly informs us that even though Tonys case is not settled yet, they are talking to their parents about getting married. Tonys parents are responsible for planning the wedding, and Kelly is supposed to go live with them. Over a sequence of a busy and noisy house and Kelly cooking, she relates that she is hoping the wedding would be soon, and that she wants to go to college, get a degree, get a job. It is not going to be easy, Kelly says, but Tonys mom will help care for Andrew.

On the way to class, in the car, Kelly talks to Tony about the classes she will be taking. Tony says he cannot go to school, but has to work and support his family. He follows Kelly with the camera as she enters a classroom, almost to her desk, until she waves for him to leave. In a voice-over, she says that sometimes she thinks Tony does not understand why she has to be in college and why she would not stay home while Andrew is so young. And I tell him, No way, I have to get on with my education.

Back home, confiding in the camera, she explains how she has been really busy with homework and with Andrew. People think that once you have a baby, she explains, everything stops. But there is so much more in life, you know, especially for me cause Im young. Kelly says she dreams of getting on with her education, getting a job, having a futurea better future for the baby. Her conversation with the camera is juxtaposed to footage of a happy Andrew playing on the floor.

Tony films the family New Year celebration: noisy, with a lot of preparation, and with traditional food and decorations. As the camera shows her father-in-law butchering a hen in a traditional ritual and her mother-in-law preparing some food, Kelly narrates the significance of the big holiday as a spiritual celebration to get us through the year. It has been difficult for her because the Mien people expect a daughter-in-law to help out a lot in the household but she has been really busy and has not had the time. But she is glad, she tells us reflectively, that at least Tony is happy to spend his first New Year at home after being in jail.

In the Youth Centers van, Tony talks to his supervisor and boasts that things are looking good with Kelly helping out more at home. Speaking patiently and slowly, his friend explains that Tony needs to think about what is important to Kelly as well; maybe college? Tony replies that she has a baby now, and she might not have all she wants but she finished high school. You are not a school person, his friend tells him, but she might be. Tony concludes that Kelly is in the middle.

Confiding in the camera, Kelly shares that lately Tony has been complaining that she only has time for school. And that pisses me off really bad. If she did not care, Kelly explains, she would not be going to school and trying to start a future for them because it is hard to study and be with both of them. And she is so young and experiencing being a wife, a mother, and a daughter-in-law. Its like ten loads of laundry, dirty laundry, all piled up at one time and I have to finish it in two hours, Kelly says in a sad and weary voice.

The camera cuts to a coin laundromat where it is difficult to understand what Kelly and Tony are saying to each other amid the noise of the washers. You are dumb, I always need to tell you what to do, Kelly accuses Tony. So you know what to do, he quips. And I do it most of the time, she replies quickly.

In another instance, Tony again asks Kelly questions from behind the camera. How does she feel about living with his family? She does not hate his family, she explains. If she were visiting them, it would be fine, but living with them is hard. Are they not all part of a family? She does not feel comfortable here, Kelly tells Tony, and she cannot say anything when she is bothered because it would be disrespectful to his parents. But that is not the reason, Tony says, and she is using the family as an excuse. Instead of answering, Kelly stares, as if in disbelief, into the camera and him.

On the way to school, in the car, Kelly is angry with Tony. Is it just because they are not married? No, she is not getting any help with Andrew. His parents have to take care of their own kids and do not have time for another baby. On his way back, Tony tells us that our relationship right now is not like perfect and that he will need to talk to Kelly.

For the first time, Kelly and Tony sit side by side to address the camera. Without concealing her weariness, Kelly says she feels like everyone is making excuses to postpone their wedding. Tony explains to her that it is not that he does not want to marry but the Mien people expect a couple to prove to the parents that their relationship is good, and expect a wife to help out, to cook for him, for his son, and for his parents. Kellys tone is highly ironic when she asks if that is why they have been postponing the wedding. If they were to move out, she says, they would not have problems because of the family. They do not have to marry the family. And how would you feel if you had to live with mine and clean and cook for me? Kelly asks.

As the two go to bed, Tonys mom enters the room and starts lecturing them on good relationships: they need to share the work and learn to get along better. A wedding is a lot of money and energy that go wasted if the couple breaks up. This part is subtitled, as the mother does not speak English, but it is not clear whether that is to avoid being understood by the camera.

One month later, Kelly, looking calmer, sounding softer, and almost smiling, confides in the camera again. Things have been better, she is trying to make herself at home here. She is pregnant again. When she found out, she did not want to keep the baby because she has not done anything with her life and goals yet, Kelly tells the camera, pausing and stammering. Everything is on hold now because of the baby, and she finds no understanding from the in-laws or even Tony. When they found out that she was pregnant, they were happy and did not understand why she did not want to quit school. I feel so disappointed in myself, Kelly says.

It will be hard, Kelly tells the camera quietly and cheerlessly. She could have had her dreams fulfilled her dreams of having everything perfect before she had kids, the American dream plus being a perfect mother. Now she cannot change things; she can change the future but not the past. She will have no more kids, get her priorities straight, and just, you know, live on. Tonys case is finally settled. He is not going to be deported. When confronted by the camera, Kelly tells him, matter-of-factly, that she is really happy for him.

In a final sequence, she sits outside with Tony and Andrew. Almost ignoring Tonys questions, Kelly says that having kids is part of growing up, that she had all these plans to get married and go to school, and that she still wants them but it will all have to be one step at a time. At least now she knows that Tony will be here for her, for Andrew, and for their second baby. The documentary concludes the way it started, with some text letting us know what happened after the camera was turned off. A year and a half after they began filming, Kelly and Tonys second baby, Jennifer, was born. Three months later, Kelly re-enrolled at Laney Junior College and is still working toward her degree.

Style/Structure

The film is structured as a diary, both by Kelly and Tony, and has all the advantages and limitations of diary records by unskilled diarists. All the footage used in Kelly Loves Tony was shot by the couple themselves, with the camcorder which director Spencer Nakasako gave them. As a result of being practically made by amateurs (Kelly and Tony delivered 170 hours of footage, which Nakasako edited), the film has been charged by Boston Globe reviewer John Koch with having almost overwhelming disadvantages. The most obvious is that Kelly and Tony do not interact visually or easily, as one of them is always behind the camera filming. Further, it is often difficult to hear and make out what they are saying when they offer their narration off-camera.

At the same time, the record is an unprecedented look inside the lives of people whose humanity is never addressed in mass media. Kelly often addresses the camera in private, which lets the viewer enter her world directly and easily. Spencer Nakasako explained Kelly told me that she kept a written diary. And so when I first met her I said, well, this is almost the same thing, except that it can be a video diary. Both Kelly and Tony seem comfortable showing things as they were, and addressing the camera as a third person.

An interesting addition to the film are the old photographs, which Kelly decides to show while filming her home and telling her family history. They were probably taken back in her parents home country, and symbolize to her a past and a place she has never seen but is bound to. While

she offers an explanation of her fathers death that sounds like what she was told as a child (He died because of the war, you know), her everyday life is shaped by the traditions and beliefs of her fathers generation. Nakasako says of Kelly and Tony that he sees them as negotiating between their Laotian side and American side and trying to come to terms with that. The conflict is not only between generations but also between Kelly and Tony themselves, as she embraces the American dream while he remains closer to the Mien tradition.

The film is more Kellys than Tonys, because she is more articulate and assumes more responsibility for the project. The problem that drives the film is the question of whether Kelly will achieve her goals. She says, in the voice of someone who has learned the line from high school counselors, I cant change the past, but I can always change the future. The film keeps betraying that pious hope, however, because she must work within existing expectations within her cultural network, and within the consequences of former actions over which she has no control. Therefore, her earnest confession to the camera is commented on by the events captured by the camera.

Kellys sense of a narrative, betrayed by events, contrasts with Tonys episodic diary entries, many of them either spurred by Kelly or by other figures in his life. He appears to lack a sense of a story to his life. His learned truth, it seems, is that he must be a provider, but this is an assignment and not an objective. The frail narrative thread Kellys struggle to assert herself and create a future for herself keeps snapping under the weight of events. It is renewed again and again by her fierce hope and determination.

The naivete of the couples self-presentations, their unformed quality, the bleakness of their surroundings and the lack of a sustained narrative all form a complex commentary on the diary entries themselves. The couple become a performance of their plight; their poverty is physical but it is also a poverty of history, dream, and possibility. Their families, new in the U.S., cannot use much of their own traditions constructively. Kelly and Tony have very little useable past, and their opportunities to control their futures are highly constrained. The choice of a diary format puts their own will and choices in the center of the frame, while also identifying it as a text to be read by the viewer.

Background on Director/Film

The project that turned into Kelly Loves Tony started in 1995, when the executive director of the East Bay Asian Youth Center approached Spencer Nakasako. He had seen Nakasakos film A.k.a. Don Bonus, the video diary of an Asian American high school boy shot by him and edited by Nakasako, and suggested that the filmmaker continue the video diary series with kids from the Youth Center. When the director met Kelly and Tony, they were willing to tell their story in a very simple way. They were from opposite sides of the tracks Kellys a good girl and Tonys a bad guy so I was very much intrigued by what brought them together, he says. That was the starting point, and then he followed their story to see if they were going to make it.

The process of making the film, the two said later, enhanced their communication. With the camera, Tony started talking more, said Kelly. It got us closer and made us more understanding of each other. Tony said he learned that I could do something good with my life besides being on the street hanging out with friends and getting in trouble. Nakasako himself believes that they did not approach the story from an issue- or conflict-oriented point of view. Rather, the films, or

projects, he has made are really about survival on a day-to-day level.

As Nakasako told Pat Aufderheide in 1997, having his subjects film the material not only adds a real feeling of authenticity, but also lets the kids benefit from the project: I think that from a nonfilmic point of view, from a personal point of view there is a kind of missionary attitude, where you are really helping kids. Working with them on this different form, the director said, he gets to know them and becomes collaboratively involved with them. Using A.k.a. Don Bonus as an example, he said, What people ignore in the Bonus model is that we both got a lot out of it. Don because he had this camera to examine his life in a way he might have never have although he didnt think about that while he was filming and for me Im allowed into this world I would probably never have been allowed into if I didnt do this project. A.k.a. Don Bonus had taught Nakasako that such films could touch the lives of other young people like the subjects: I think many people working in the street are just trying to get people to talk to each other, make connections, as opposed to these more broad, sweeping, more appealing or grander claims. Nakasako believed that the film spoke across ethnic lines. The negotiation between a foreign and the American side is a negotiation that every American has gone through since the Mayflower, Nakasako believes.

Spencer Nakasako won a National Emmy Award in 1997 for A.k.a. Don Bonus. He wrote the screenplay and co-directed, with Wayne Wang, a feature film about Hong Kong, *Life is Cheap but Toilet Paper is Expensive*, and co-produced *School Colors*, a documentary about the graduating class of 1994 at Berkeley High School. Nakasako also directed and produced two documentaries which were aired nationally on PBS and awarded numerous prizes: *Monterey's Boat People* (1984) about the conflict between Vietnamese and local fishermen in Monterey, and *Talking History* (1986) about the history of Asian women in the United States.

Production Context

This project participated in a trend in the 1990s to capitalize on the ease of use of new camcorder equipment to work with youth. People who work with youth have historically seized on media as a way to engage them with expression. Projects such as Educational Video Center and DCTV, both based in New York, have used video since the 1970s. Media arts centers, fostered by federal arts subsidies and establishment foundation grants from the 1970s on, provided opportunities for social-action projects nationwide. Camcorders expanded the opportunities to film, although they did nothing to solve the problems of crafting raw material into expression. This was the great challenge of the material Nakasako gathered with *Kelly Loves Tony*. Like other filmmakers who offer technical support to nonfilmmakers, including Steve Atlas, Ilan Ziv and Peter Kinoy, he made the shaping choices to turn it into a film. The flurry of made-with projects stumbled in reaching audiences, since they often proved richer experiences in the making than in the viewing. However, their honesty of voice was compelling for certain audiences, especially those intimately connected with the subjects.

The project was completed with the help of two public television organizations, both with their roots in media activism. NAATA is one of the ethnic consortia established by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in the wake of pressure and protest from civil rights groups in the 1970s. Independent Television Service is the product of a decades worth of organized pressure from independents, typically claiming that their diversity as a body of producers translated into the diversity of expression that was critical to the health of a democracy.

Reception/Distribution

The film was produced by NAATA in association with Independent Television Service, and was aired as part of the P.O.V. series on June 30, 1998. It opened the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival in 1998. Margin Films released A.k.a. Don Bonus and Kelly Loves Tony together under the title American Dreams.

An indication of the film's warm reception by audiences is the viewer comments under the Tube Talk column of the P.O.V. Interactive website. In numerous entries, viewers shared that they appreciated the film for allowing them into the life of these young people and into a world very different from their own. Numerous requests were posted on the website by viewers who wanted to find out about the life of the couple after the camera was turned off. Occasionally, the interactive website was a forum for viewers to express ideas on the East-West conflict they saw in the film and for other members of the immigrant East Asian community to post accounts of experiences similar to those of Kelly and Tony.

Further Reading:

Chasnoff, S. (1996). Performing teen motherhood on video: autoethnography as counterdiscourse. In Smith, S. & Watson, J., eds. *Getting a life: everyday uses of autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 108-133.