

A documentary by Ian W Thomson



Colleen

Becoming

Finding the Shoe that Fits

*A story of transitioning at 82,
a love beyond gender,
and the joy of finding the perfect pair of shoes.*

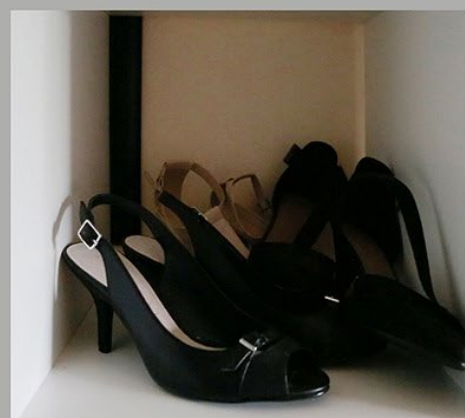
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A STUDY GUIDE BY
KATY MARRINER



FINDING THE SHOE THAT FITS

Becoming Colleen (2019), a documentary by Ian W Thomson, is a story of 85-year-old Colleen Young's decision to come out and gender transition from male to female as she enters into aged care in regional Australia. The documentary addresses issues of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity in aged care in regional Australia.

Premiering in January 2019, the film has won awards for Best Film, Best Documentary and the Audience Award at the Melbourne Queer Film Festival, Mardi Gras Film Festival and Screenwave International Film Festival respectively. It will screen on the ABC program *Compass* in September 2019.

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CURRICULUM LINKS

Becoming Colleen endorses a social view of health: that health is created in the communities in which we live, and that it is important to empower individuals and communities to take action to promote health. Through viewing and studying the documentary, students are able to identify that human development is about expanding individuals' choices; enhancing individuals' capabilities and their freedoms; and enabling people to live full, productive and creative lives.

Older LGBTI+ Australians have experienced less tolerant times. They have suffered stigma, discrimination, criminalisation, family rejection and social isolation. These negative experiences have shaped their lives and impacted on their health and wellbeing, affecting their self-acceptance and their self-esteem. Many older LGBTI+ people lack the support networks and access to resources that they need to live life on their terms. *Becoming Colleen* provides an insight into the significant challenges facing LGBTI+ people, particularly the elderly.

This study guide to accompany *Becoming Colleen* has been written for secondary students in Years 10–12. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Ethics and Health and Human Development. Teachers are advised to consult the Australian Curriculum online at <<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au>> and curriculum outlines relevant to their state or territory for further information.

Becoming Colleen is also a valuable resource for students undertaking certificate and tertiary studies in Community Services and Health. While the study guide has been specifically written for students, many of the suggested activities may support the professional learning of health and aged care workers, and facilitate discussion in community groups supporting elderly people who identify as LGBTI+ and their families and friends.

The *Becoming Colleen* study guide invites students to:

- share their responses to the story told by the documentary;

- ask questions about the ideas and issues explored in the documentary;
- analyse the construction of *Becoming Colleen* and comment on the ways it represents an interpretation of ideas and experiences.

The study guide is structured as a series of discussions that follow the narrative told by the documentary. The activities promote student engagement and active participation via individual reflection, class discussions, and small group and team work. Multiple activities are provided to allow teachers to select those which will best suit the demands of the subject and the needs of the students. Teachers may select from the information and activities to support students' viewing and close analysis of *Becoming Colleen*.

Activities in this study guide provide opportunities for students to acquire a knowledge and understanding of:

- the concepts of gender, sex and sexuality;
- the concepts of respect, acceptance and tolerance;
- the establishment of personal identity and the factors that shape identity;
- societal attitudes to people who identify as LGBTI+;
- the specific health and wellbeing needs of the LGBTI+ population and subgroups within this population;
- ways to improve the health, wellbeing and lived experiences of LGBTI+ people;
- policies and practices to support older LGBTI+ people;
- the impact of gender identity discrimination;
- issues facing people who want to affirm or transition gender identity;
- the importance of challenging and preventing gender identity discrimination;

Teachers are advised to preview *Becoming Colleen* before showing it to students. Students should be briefed about the content and purpose of *Becoming Colleen* prior to viewing. For some students in the class, viewing the documentary may be confronting. Teachers need to respect the circumstances of these students and remain aware of their sensitivities.

SYNOPSIS

Becoming Colleen is a documentary about one woman's transition from male to female in the conservative coastal community of Coffs Harbour on the NSW mid-north coast. Having lived most of her life as Colin – a husband, father, policeman, film projectionist and self-declared shoe fetishist – Colleen faces the challenge of transitioning her gender identity late in life.

From early childhood, Colleen knew she was a girl in the body of a boy, but after the untimely death of her sympathetic mother she sought acceptance by suppressing a vital part of herself. Colleen went on to marry Heather and became the father of two sons. It was only later in life that she started to open up to her wife.

After losing Heather to a brain tumour, Colleen finds herself living alone in Lime Tree Retirement Village. She takes the first steps to live openly as a transwoman, and finds some unexpected allies: Heather's best friend Denise, who lovingly helps her select her daily outfit, and the delightful Yvette who comes by to do Colleen's make-up. Social worker Rowena Bianchino supports Colleen as her physical reality contradicts her desire for independence and as the time arrives for Colleen's move into full-time care.



Acceptance

Courage

Empathy

Kindness

Love

Respect

Tolerance

Truth

Discrimination

Exclusion

Fear

Loneliness

Loss

Regret

Rejection

Shame

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

Before beginning a close analysis of *Becoming Colleen*, provide students with an opportunity to share their impressions of the stories told by the documentary. Ask students to consider what they have learned from watching *Becoming Colleen* and to identify the key ideas and issues explored in the documentary.

- Use the words in the grid above to generate a class discussion of *Becoming Colleen*. For each word,

think of a specific moment in Colleen's life that best exemplifies this word.

- What moments of *Becoming Colleen* did you find inspiring? Why?

Teachers are encouraged to access a glossary of terms relevant to the teaching of *Becoming Colleen* online at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-07/sexuality-gender-glossary-definitions/7287572/>.



WHILE WATCHING

'It's very hard wanting to be female when you're a male.'

Watch the title sequence of *Becoming Colleen* from 00:00:00 to 00:01:22.

In this sequence, Colleen describes a lifetime of hiding her true self:

It's very hard wanting to be female when you're a male. You have to hide your reactions and your feelings a lot. Just how I managed to do that, I don't quite know. There's such a hatred against transgenderism, at my age, my vintage. It would mean so much to me, to be able to be what I want to be, to have all the bits and pieces that I want. I'd like to be able to be a total woman. If I passed away under that sort of surgery, I'd go quite happily because I'd be going the way I want to be.

- Define the following terms:
 - **GENDER**
 - **SEXUALITY**
 - **TRANSGENDER**
 - **GENDER DIVERSE**

Having defined these terms, spend time as a class

discussing student understanding of these terms.

Recommended link: <<https://schools.au.reachout.com/articles/gender-and-sexuality/>>

- Why did Colleen keep her transgender identity a secret for so long?
- Write a detailed analysis of this sequence, identifying how codes and conventions are used to construct meaning for the identified audience.

Media codes are technical, written and symbolic tools used to construct or suggest meaning in media forms and products. Media codes include the use of camera, acting, setting, mise en scène, editing, lighting, sound, special effects, typography, colour, visual composition, text and graphics.

Media conventions are rules or generally accepted ways of constructing form and informing meaning in media products including story principles, form and structure, generic structures, character and story arcs, cause and effect, point of view, the structuring of time, elements of page layout, paper stock for print, titles and credits sequences, hyperlinking and mounting and framing of images.

- Explain the significance of the title, *Becoming Colleen*, and the subtitle, *Finding the Shoe that Fits*.

'I always used to ask my mum if I could be a girl.'

Watch from 00:01:25 to 00:04:08.

The director of *Becoming Colleen*, Ian W Thomson, relies on re-enactments to tell parts of Colleen's story. In the first of these re-enactments, Thomson dramatises moments from Colleen's childhood. A young Colleen, sitting in a fork of a tall tree, carves a pair of gumboots into a pair of girl's shoes. She watches from a vantage point near the local ballet school as two girls her age, dressed in ballet clothing, pass by on their way to class. Colleen, now working as a theatre projectionist, buys a pair of ballet shoes to wear in the privacy of the projection room.

Sex refers to the identity assigned to a person at birth based on physical characteristics. **Gender** refers to a person's internal sense of identity. A person's gender is what feels natural to them, even if it is different from the gender assigned to them at birth. Since childhood, Colleen has identified as a female.

- *When I was a youngster, I always used to ask my mum if I could be a girl. Unfortunately, she passed away when I was between five and six. And I had nobody to talk to. I daren't mention it to my father. Otherwise, I got a clip over the head. I didn't really see a lot of my father, only when I did something wrong and got into trouble.* – Colleen

How does *Becoming Colleen* portray Colleen's relationship with her parents? What does *Becoming Colleen* suggest about the role that parents should play in promoting healthy gender development in children?

- When do children become aware of their gender? How do children usually express their gender identity? What factors influence a child's gender-specific behaviour? What are gender norms? Do you think childhood gender stereotypes are a thing of the past?
- Write a detailed analysis of the re-enactments featured in this sequence of the documentary. Your analysis should focus on the portrayal of gender identity and how codes and conventions are used to shape this portrayal.
- Explain the significance of Colleen's pair of Mary Jane shoes made from gumboots and the ballet shoes that she purchased with her wages earned as a projectionist.



Heather

Watch from 00:04:10 to 00:13:25.

Colleen met Heather when she was in her early twenties. In *Becoming Colleen*, she recollects their courtship:

And I got very friendly with Heather's family, being a piper and Heather being a highland dancer, I could play the pipes and Heather would dance. And it slowly went on from there. I don't remember how I got engaged to be quite honest, it sort of just seemed to happen.

- *I thought the world of Heather and I was determined not to say anything at this stage. But I had hoped that one day I'd have the opportunity to talk to her about it and at least mention what was going on in my mind and hopefully she might accept it a wee bit. I don't think I was being fair to Heather at the time. I think I could have somehow done it better.*

What does this claim reveal about Colleen's regard for Heather? What is a respectful relationship? What does this claim reveal about Colleen's understanding of the qualities of a respectful relationship?

- In *Becoming Colleen*, Colleen acknowledges Heather's strengths as a wife and as a mother. How does the



director Ian W Thomson use archival stills and footage to portray Heather and endorse Colleen's descriptions of Heather? How does Thomson use re-enactments to portray Heather and endorse Colleen's descriptions of Heather?

When Heather was at work and Colleen was home alone, she would dress up in Heather's clothes. While Heather was surprised by Colleen's behaviour, she wanted to understand her husband's motivation. In *Becoming Colleen*, Colleen recalls Heather's acceptance:

On occasion, she'd buy me things, a pair of stockings or something like that. It was just so nice and so – I got so much pleasure out of it. And I think she actually got a lot of pleasure out of just me, being a normal person and myself. Heather was an outstanding person. How she could be so accepting of all of this used to make me wonder.

- How did Heather demonstrate her willingness to understand Colleen's identification as a woman? How did Heather confirm her unconditional acceptance of and love for her husband?

While Heather knew the truth about Colleen's sense of self, Colleen did not disclose the truth to their sons.

- *When I was probably around about ten or eleven, one of the houses that dad built, he decided to put a pool out the back, or out the side of the house, it was just a round swimming pool. We were all sort of digging the ground out and compacting and everything, and we were all jumping up and down on it. Dad came out in a little pair of shoes with a heel probably around about that high, and they weren't sort of a men's shoe, they were Mum's. – John*
How does *Becoming Colleen* portray John's understanding and acceptance of his father's transgender identity?

When Colleen and Heather retired, they moved to Coffs Harbour. Through the recollections of Colleen and Denise, a neighbour at Lime Tree Village in Coffs Harbour, *Becoming Colleen* portrays the circumstances and impact of Heather's death.

- *Heather was the only person that I ever found that would talk. – Colleen*
How does *Becoming Colleen* portray the impact of Heather's death?

Gender Dysphoria

Watch from 00:13:26 to 00:15:27.

Following Heather's death, Colleen's experience of loneliness led her to seek support. It was Rowena, a social worker, who introduced Colleen to the term gender dysphoria.

- What is gender dysphoria? What are the symptoms of gender dysphoria? How is gender dysphoria diagnosed? How is gender dysphoria treated?
- *The loss of her wife was a trigger which finally released her. So, in particular, the older generation, they tend to have these kind of key milestone events, which enables them to really move forward. The issue comes when people experience the dysphoria. The way to treat them of their dysphoria is giving them hormone treatment and sometimes surgery. – Dr Vlahakis*
It's really quite common for people who have dysphoria when they actually do start to take the hormones that match the inside of their body, so much anxiety falls away and they instantly start to feel better. – Rowena
 - What is gender affirmation?
 - What is medical affirmation?
 - What is legal affirmation?
 - What is social affirmation?
 - Explain the physical, social and emotional impacts of Colleen's treatment.
 - Aside from hormone treatment, what other choices does Colleen make in order to affirm her gender identity?
- In this sequence, Yvette, a visiting beautician, gives Colleen a manicure. Explain the significance of this scene.

Coming Out

Watch from 00:15:27 to 00:17:17.

Becoming Colleen documents Colleen's decision to tell Denise and her son John about being transgender.

- *He was crying, he was in tears. And he says, 'I need to let you know that I'm transgender.' I said, yeah so? It was a bit of a silence and he goes, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'Well, I've known, I know.' He said, 'How do you know?' I said, 'I've known for years, Dad. Like I've known something was there.'*
– John

He said, 'I've got something I'd like to tell you, you might be very shocked.' And I just waited till she said it, and he said, 'I'm transgender and I've been this way since I was' – that he can remember – 'five years old.' And I said, 'Oh really? Wow.' And I said, 'So Heather didn't tell me this when she asked me to look after you.' And he just laughed.' – Denise

What do these claims reveal about John and Denise's regard for Colleen? What do these claims reveal about John and Denise's understanding of the qualities of respectful relationships? Why do LGBTI+ people need supportive family and friends?

- *Everyone seemed to just disappear in his life when they found out, and I think a lot of them said, 'Well, why at this stage of his life?'. And I said because this is what he's thought about all his life.*

Using this claim as a starting point, identify the particular challenges facing older LGBTI+ people when they decide to come out? How do you think living in a regional community adds to the challenges that Colleen faces in coming out?



Gender Reassignment

Watch from 00:17:18 to 00:18:39.

- Yvette: Here it comes. Here we go. What do you think?
Colleen: Very nice, very nice.
Yvette: Very nice?
Colleen: Hard to imagine it's me.
Explain the significance of Yvette and Colleen's conversation.

For Colleen, gender reassignment is something that she has dreamed of for her whole life. The possibility of not recovering from the surgery does not daunt her.

- Colleen: It's just something I've dreamed of my

whole life. I can't really explain clearly why. It's a dream and I suppose when you have a dream it stays with you most of your life. I can still see those young girls all dressed up in lovely coloured clothes, just giggling and laughing and enjoying themselves.

Rowena: And I'd say to her but what if, you know, what if you don't recover from the surgery. What if you die? And she'd say, 'But I'd die a woman'.

- What is gender reassignment?
- Why is gender reassignment important to Colleen?
- Explain the reasons why Rowena felt both cautious and supportive about Colleen's decision to undergo gender reassignment surgery.

Aged Care

Watch from 00:18:41 to 00:21:18.

Just when Colleen had started to live in the world as a woman, a series of falls required her to be hospitalised. Unable to continue living independently at Lime Tree Village, Colleen moved into an aged care home.

Becoming Colleen highlights the issues faced by elderly LGBTI+ people entering into aged care.

- What is aged care?
- When it came to the inevitability that she was to move into care, one of the considerations was a place where she may not have to go back into the closet because that's a huge concern to her, and that made life almost unbearable when she thought about not being Colleen. *Having to hide that.* – Rowena
 - What are the challenges for people living in aged care? What do you think are the challenges for people of diverse gender identity and sexual orientation living in aged care?
 - Using Rowena's claim as a starting point, list the challenges facing Colleen in her shift to aged care. What do the claims made by Marjory, a resident at the aged care home, and Colleen's friend Denise reveal about Colleen's initial experiences of aged care and the impact of these experiences?

The Right Pair of Shoes

Watch from 00:21:19 to 00:23:49.

Colleen's feelings of acceptance and belonging in aged care has much to do with staff member Pippa. For both Pippa and Colleen, shoes are everything. With Pippa's encouragement, Colleen's shoe collection has allowed her to express her identity and feel accepted. Colleen's shoes are also the envy of many.

- *I just want her to know that it's not her problem. It's not a problem. She's here, she's safe, she can live her life as she wants to live now. And no one's judging, no one's stopping her from being the person that she wants to be.* – Pippa

Describe Pippa and Colleen's relationship. Explain how Pippa affirms Colleen's sense of identity and belonging.

Explain the significance and the symbolism of Colleen's shoe collection.
- *One of the lovely ladies up there tried to convince him to get an electric scooter, and he was excited about that. He showed me the photos and he picked a red one because they go faster.* – Denise

What does the footage of Colleen driving her electric scooter around the aged care home suggest about her sense of identity and belonging?





**'The main thing
in my life is wishing.'**

Watch from 00:23:50 to 00:26:30.

The thing is you can't keep wishing it's going to be some way and it's not. It is what it is at the present time, and I don't think, nothing's ever going to be fulfilled for her. That's sad. And she's going to die, and she won't have achieved what she wanted to achieve. And I can't do anything about it, no one can. That's sad. – Denise

I think as a society we've got a long way to go to accept these people. To know that this is not something that's chosen. That these people aren't freaks. That they're just, you know, different, and we have to be able to accept and explore and celebrate the difference. I think in regional areas it's another order of magnitude. The discrimination they face. – Dr Vlahakis

All I've been through, all the fights and scraps I've had and how fighting things didn't always help. You've got to try and be negative, you've got to try and fight somebody or some organisation. But it didn't really help. And I found that I was better just to try and coax people into your side of the thinking. And have a bit of a laugh, try and add a bit of comedy in your life and what you've been through and what you might be going to go through and hope that some of those things come along that you would like. You probably won't get them but, one can but wish. The main thing in my life is wishing. – Colleen

Use these three claims to initiate a class discussion about Colleen and the life that she was able to live. Why is it important to tell stories like Colleen's?

A few months after filming, Colleen passed away. Denise and Pippa were by her side.

She was wearing her favourite pair of shoes.

- What does *Becoming Colleen* tell us about elderly people who identify as LGBTI+? Ask students to endorse their responses with specific evidence from the documentary.
- How has your understanding of the issues facing people who identify as LGBTI+ changed since watching *Becoming Colleen*?
- Working individually, create an A3 collage of words and images that offers a response to an idea explored in *Becoming Colleen*. Use these responses to compose a class mural that reveals the concerns of the documentary.



INVESTIGATION 1

TRANSGENDER

Your task is to investigate the history of transgender people. Your research should embrace the history of transgender people in Western society and other cultures. Compile an annotated timeline. Your timeline should acknowledge:

- the discrimination faced by transgender people;
- the activism of transgender people;
- significant transgender people;
- the visibility of transgender people;
- the rights of transgender people.



INVESTIGATION 2

LGBTI+ PEOPLE AND AGEING AND AGED CARE

Your task is to investigate LGBTI+ people and ageing and aged Care in Australia. Use the key questions to guide your online research.

Key questions:

1. What are the needs of older LGBTI+ people?
2. What are the issues facing older LGBTI+ people?
3. What are the issues facing older LGBTI+ people who need to access aged care?
4. What type of aged care services should be accessible to older LGBTI+ people? How can aged care services be made more inclusive? How can the quality of aged care services available to older LGBTI+ people be improved? What can be done to give older LGBTI+ people a sense of empowerment?
5. Why are older LGBTI+ people more likely to need aged care?
6. What is the Australian Government doing to make aged care more inclusive? How is the Australian Government working to address the ageing needs of LGBTI+ people? What else could the Australian Government do?

7. What is the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety? What is the Commission's role? What are the Commission's responsibilities?

Recommended link: <<https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>>.

What is Silver Rainbow? What are the objectives of Silver Rainbow?

Recommended link: <<https://lgbtihealth.org.au/elders/>>.

8. What is the rainbow tick of approval?

Drawing on your research, write an opinion piece that argues that all aged care providers must achieve a rainbow tick of approval.

Recommended resource: Commonwealth of Australia, *National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) Ageing and Aged Care Strategy*, 2012, <<https://agedcare.health.gov.au/older-people-their-families-and-carers/people-from-diverse-backgrounds/national-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-intersex-lgbti-ageing-and-aged-care-strategy/>>, accessed 13 August 2019.

Recommended reading: E Duncan & P Abboud, 'Elderly LGBTIQ+ Aged Care Residents Say They're Being Forced 'Back into the Closet'', SBS The Feed, 6 June 2019, <<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/elderly-lgbtqi-aged-care-residents-say-they-re-being-forced-back-into-the-closet?cid=news%3Asocialshare%3Afacebook&fbclid=IwAR0G9k6QdU5MCawz-l8YJmoidsKdvSVpm1GTM8l9vb1NqaT8inkl4cqg52o/>>, accessed 13 August 2019.



CLASS FORUM

CREATING SOCIETAL CHANGE

Hold a class forum. Each student is required to prepare a one-minute statement that offers their answer to the question:

how can Australian society move from tolerance and acceptance to valuing and celebrating people from the LGBTI+ community?

PRODUCER, DIRECTOR IAN W THOMSON

Ian W Thomson wrote and directed *OUT in the Line-Up*, an exposé on homosexuality in surfing which has won ten international awards, screened on Netflix and in festivals around the world. He has also directed a number of successful shorts and TV documentaries including projects on David Byrne and on The Berlin Video Art Festival. Thomson is currently head of the Advertising and Digital Media faculty at Macleay College and works as a creative and brand consultant. His passion is making documentaries on subjects that matter.

CREDITS

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LINKS

Website

<https://www.becomingcolleen.com>

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/ThomsonFilms/>

Instagram

<https://www.instagram.com/becomingcolleen/?hl=en/>

Trailer

<https://vimeo.com/229551398/>

J King, 'Transgender woman Colleen Young's dream of being who she wanted was her secret for more than 80 years', ABC Life, 15 May 2019, <<https://www.abc.net.au/life/transgender-woman-colleen-youngs-dream-to-live-as-she-wanted/10928666?fbclid=IwAR1sKw0r1d6oc7iWt2V7Rh9KrQozkW2l8HltdtcyQ7zIRODdcTUsVVBhs0g/>>, accessed 13 August 2019.

B Brook, 'I was scared of anyone finding out about the problem': Coming out as transgender at 82 years old', news.com.au, 1 February 2019, <<https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/relationships/marriage/i-was-scared-of-anyone-finding-out-about-the-problem-coming-out-as-transgender-at-82-years-old/news-story/02a532958e157003b6967b15437a8e24/>>, accessed 13 August 2019.



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