

# Child puts fresh face on transgender

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oy Mathis, a onetime student at Cherry Creek Schools, is the subject of *Growing Up Coy*, a documentary at the Denver Film Festival this month. Coy was at the center of a 2013 lawsuit affirming transgender rights.

## ***'Growing Up Coy' plays Denver Film Festival***

**BY PETER JONES**  
NEWS EDITOR

Growing up Coy was never going to be easy, but it certainly became a lot less difficult after moving into the Cherry Creek School District.

"The experience has been very positive. Kids at that age really don't care about things like that," said filmmaker Eric Juhola, whose cameras followed the Mathis family for two years as Coy, then 5, became the center of a high-profile legal case in southern Colorado and the most well-known professed transgender girl in the state.

"What's important in Coy's case is she does have such a good support network with her family and friends. She has a therapist, teachers and people she can turn to for help and advice when she needs it. A lot of kids don't have their family support and don't have a network of support they can turn to," Juhola said.

The emotional story of Coy's precedent-setting lawsuit, a resilient family and a child who unselfconsciously strived to be herself are the focus of *Growing Up Coy*, a new documentary that will have its Colorado premiere, Nov. 11-13, at

the Denver Film Festival.

“They knew they would probably have to go public in order to get their story out there,” the filmmaker said of the family’s decision to approve a film crew following them for two years.

In an era that has seen not only the infamous transition of Olympian Bruce Jenner, but a television drama punnily titled *Transparent*, and the first openly transgender candidate for Congress in Colorado, one might think society has heard it all about gender conformity. But as seen through the eyes of a wide-eyed grade-schooler, *Growing Up Coy* brings a new perspective with the potential to alter the conversation—and even the heated argument—about the place and legitimacy of a transgender person, especially a child.

“A lot of people say that celebrities are making it easier for regular people to come out and be freely, but it’s also the reverse of that,” Juhola said. “... Put yourself in somebody’s shoes for 90 minutes and really see an issue from a different point of view. I just remember thinking at the moment I met Coy, this is just a kid who wants to be like any other little kid.”



Coy Mathis stands at mother Kathryn’s side as father Jeremy, at left, and attorney Michael Silverman speak to the press at the state Capitol.

### **‘Not even my teachers know I’m a girl’**

The documentary begins at Fountain’s Eagleside Elementary School in 2012 after Jeremy, a former Marine, and his wife Kathryn Mathis have come to grips with Coy’s nonconformity—wearing girls’ clothes, playing with girls’ toys—as more than childhood fancy. By now, the toddler, a triplet with two sisters, had even broached medical solutions.

“When are we going to the doctor to get me fixed?” Coy had asked her mother.

Most frustrating for the family at the time was when the kindergarten teacher forced the child to line up with the boys at school every day.

“Not even my teachers know I’m a girl!” Coy would cry to her parents.

“Coy would have nervous breakdowns,” Juhola added. “She wouldn’t want to leave the house. She wouldn’t want to go to schools. It was behavior over time that really made them realize, OK, this is not just a phase.”

Even with friends, family—and now a therapist—Coy’s problems were far from over. Most troublesome for the family was the school’s refusal to allow Coy to use the girls’ restroom. After a period of homeschooling their children—which include a daughter with autism and another confined to a wheelchair—the Mathises sought legal remedy through attorney Michael Silverman of the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund.

A judgement from the Colorado Civil Rights Division in 2013 found the Fountain-Fort Carson School District in violation of the state’s anti-discrimination law, which had been amended five years earlier to explicitly include transgender people—one of only 17 states to do so.

“What was really shocking to me was how freely people went on the attack against the Mathis family,” Juhola said. “People don’t really say negative things to your face anymore, but they can go online and say the most hateful things they can think of.”

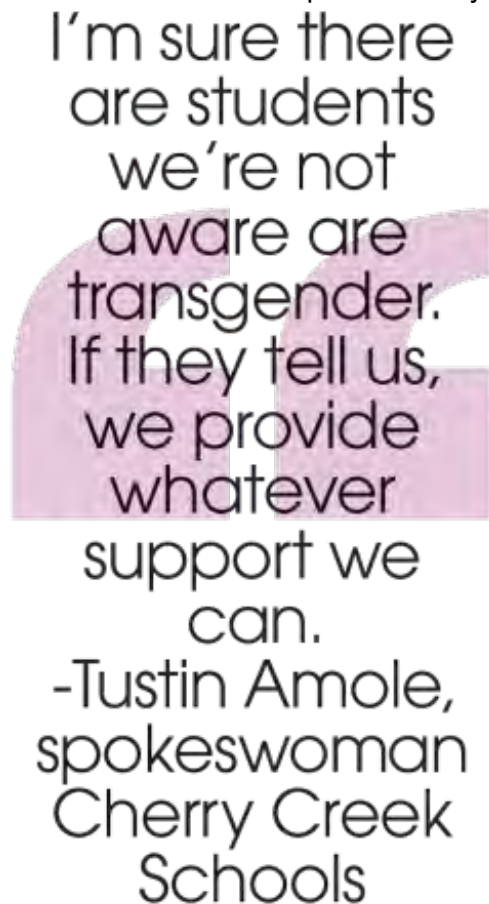
Before long, Coy’s story was on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, alongside Paul McCartney.

### **A welcome in Arapahoe County**

Despite a legal victory, the Mathises opted to move to south Aurora and a school district more accepting of diversity, and away from the Christian-right leanings of Colorado Springs.

Although Tustin Amole, spokeswoman for Cherry Creek Schools, cannot comment on individual students or even confirm their enrollment, she says the district has not seen much controversy over its transgender students, even though she believes the district has had its share. Amole said only a few people have complained about such students’ restroom choices.

“We have simply explained to them that this is in the Colorado Constitution and we will continue to abide by it,” she said. “... I’m sure there are students we’re not aware are transgender. If they tell us, we provide whatever support we can.”



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-Eric Juhola, director of  
*Growing Up Coy*

The Mathises have reportedly moved and may no longer attend Cherry Creek Schools.

The couple, whose marriage has suffered according to the film, are not participating in promotion of *Growing Up Coy*, in favor of trying to regain privacy for their children, including Coy, who is about 10 now.

“As far as I know from the Mathis family, Coy is happy in school, she’s proud of who she is, and her family is proud of who she is,” Juhola said. “They were in the spotlight and now they’re ready to get back to a normal life. They fought the fight. They don’t need to go on red carpets.”

Although *Growing Up Coy* ends on an ostensibly happy note, it becomes more bittersweet when one realizes Coy’s nonfiction story is anything but over.

“The battle was won, but there are many more to come and will probably be more challenging than the ones she’s gone through,” the director said.

Much of society is still not ready for the idea of a transgender child.

“Male and female are categories of existence,” Jeff Johnson of Colorado Springs’ Focus on the Family wrote in 2013. “It is dehumanizing to categorize individuals by the ever-proliferating alphabet of identities based on sexual attractions or behavior or ‘gender identity’ – LGBBTTQQIAAFPPBDSM – however many letters are added.”

Juhola has had his share of arguments with the opposition, but has more recently reduced his rejoinder to one sentence: “Now that we have a finished film, my best retort would be, watch the film and then let’s talk.”

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