

*Sarah Bahl and Jillian Boland interviewed Liza Figueroa Kravinski on May 12, 2010. Ms. Kravinski is a filmmaker who created the documentary 'Beauty: In the Eyes of the Beheld'. In this film, Ms. Kravinski explores women's opinions of beauty, what it's like for a woman to be considered beautiful, and the lives the beautiful women lead. Ms. Bahl and Ms. Boland asked questions concerning media representation of beauty and its effect on women. They also focused on the impact beauty has in interactions between women.*

My name is Liza Figueroa Kravinski. I am a filmmaker who started out as a music composer. I was in the music industry for about 10 years and then I started writing music for film and video. And after that started making films and videos myself.

As explained in my film, I had a grandmother who was considered very beautiful, and I heard all these stories growing up about how beautiful she was. It was legendary; the most famous artist in the Philippines wanted to make a sculpture of her, wanted to marry her. All these men wanted to marry her. I just kept hearing these stories. Every time I went to one of her sisters' or my aunts' I would always hear these stories, so I asked her one day, 'What was it like to be so beautiful?' And she said, 'When you're the one you don't think you're so pretty.' And as I grew older I observed things in life and noticed that seemed to be the attitude of beautiful women; it's not the big key to happiness that people think it is.

I question women are like that [who are hesitant to talk about their beauty] and I had to fool them and pump them into being a part of the interview because some of them would not have come for the interview if I had told them the truth. I feel insecure talking about that, but it has come up, and I have been treated that way in the past. So by some people's definition, yes, I am considered beautiful. Am I the most happy person because of it? No. I have a lot of other insecurities.

It [being beautiful] can make a lot of things easier, I must admit. It makes dating easier, it makes getting a job easier. But that in itself is a double-edged sword because having things come easier for you can create a lot of jealousy, it can make you feel lazy about cultivating your inner qualities, it can lead you down the wrong path. And if you go down that wrong path and you get older and your beauty fades away, you're really up the creek. So in a way it's a double-edged sword. It's sort of like sugar. It's very sweet and it tastes good, but it can be bad for you if you have too much of it.

That [downplaying success] might be more true with women, I think, downplaying their success. I think that's a woman thing to do. It's socially more acceptable to be at the same level with your peers, and that's one thing that you can hide and suppress besides dressing down; you can be quiet about your other accomplishments. I think that's true with all women, not just attractive women, but I'm suspecting it might be more with attractive women, to be more low-key about your other successes.

I actually haven't thought about it that much, but I'm just thinking on the fly here, probably because if that's true that they are more likely to hide their successes than other

women, I don't know how true that is, it's probably because they've learned already to play down themselves because of how they look perhaps. So extending it to other parts of their lives comes naturally.

I've read articles saying that some women have trouble or find it difficult to be friends with a beautiful woman because her friend [the beautiful woman] would get more attention. So I would think that perhaps people are hoping, especially women might hope, that their beautiful friend might play down their looks or just play down in general. People might think that a beautiful woman is happy and has it all and has no problems.

That's another common myth that I hear and that others sense that people think that they're all happy and have it all made because they're beautiful. They have problems just like everybody else. They might not have the problem of being considered ugly or unattractive but they have other problems. It just shifts to other problems.

I have a feeling that there's more obsession about looks than say about 20 years ago. I might be wrong but I think that cable television and the Internet have for example, infomercials about ab tightening equipment and all these beauty products, I think there's more of that than when I was growing up. And I hear that eating disorders are on the rise, I don't know if that's because more people are reporting that or recognizing that they have that. And I also know that models are getting skinnier and skinnier so that's a factor. When I was a teenager, maybe 30 years ago, I think the models were a lot heavier. They were more normal looking. I think there's emphasis on looks these days.

I went to a private girls school - St Agnes School. And the only thing I remember was everybody was drinking TAB, which was a diet drink of its day, it's like Diet Coke, so there was already concern about not gaining weight. There was this one student who really had anorexia because it was very obvious. She went to the hospital, but it was very rare and I don't know if it's more common now.

I went to high school in the 1970s and graduated in 1981. Our main concern was wearing the right clothes; people pretty much wore the same styles and were peer pressured. I think maybe we were wearing duck shoes at the time and certain kind of purse and sweaters, it was the preppy look that was in, but I don't remember it being about being skinny.

In my screening in New York a professor talked about how beauty has become commodified, that this thing about having to buy things and paying for things to be beautiful is a recent phenomenon that started in the late 1800s. I have a recording of that. I think that before mirrors and before the mass media women had less consciousness of how they looked because they were always looking outward and dealing with other people and now that we're all looking at the media our circle of comparison has gotten bigger and so we're comparing ourselves to the top one percent of beautiful women instead of one of the girls in our class of 30 or 50 or a town of 2,000. I definitely think the media has intensified our comparison with each other and a comparison with an ideal. This ideal is only presentable because the media can present it, and there it is, and with so

many more channels and more websites it's just a constant barrage. And I see that more young people are constantly on the Internet. They're always staring at their iPhones and their blackberries and less interacting with each other face to face. I may be wrong but I didn't grow up staring at the media constantly. I was spending more time with my friends and just thinking about other things.

I know that some beautiful girls can be bullies, the 'Mean Girl' syndrome. So if they're acting that way they might have fake friends. But if there's more jealousy, I would think that in some cases they would have fewer friends, and I've got some of these comments in my documentary - people saying that it was harder to make friends with females so they had male friends or they just had a couple female friends. And then one more secure woman said, 'Oh I just don't pay any attention to anybody who's mean and I just pay attention to my few friends,' so each woman handled it very differently.

But I also know that when I was growing up if you were ugly or if you had really thick glasses or if you were weird looking you didn't have many friends either, so there are so many reasons why somebody wouldn't want to be your friend. It could be because you're ugly or because you're beautiful or because you're unremarkable or something like that. But one of their complaints was that it was in some cases harder to make friend, and even you're not sure if this male friend is really a friend of yours because he just wants to be a friend or because there's some ulterior motive.

One thing I focused on in my documentary was that there are women in the media who want to announce that they're beautiful and they want to use it and they're out there on TV. You see these people and that becomes the definition of what a beautiful woman is like. But I was able to interview beautiful women who don't talk about that and who rather cast it aside and make it a very small part of their existence, and so I think that my documentary covered a greater gamut of personalities that beautiful women can have.

But you know, back to the eating disorders, when I see women or any of these obsessions about being beautiful, they always kind of chase something about being beautiful and I wonder if it's because they'll be happier once they become 'beautiful'. But one thing that I found with these women was being beautiful didn't necessarily make them happy. So all this obsessive and dangerous chasing of these goals won't necessarily get them what they think they're going to get. I also read an article saying that some of these women who were fat and then they lost a lot of weight, they discovered that they weren't any happier than before. They just discovered that they're still 'me'.

Almost everybody in the documentary said that they were underestimated because of their beauty. Even the doctor. She's a doctor already and she felt that she had to prove her competence. So even though beautiful women may get that job because of their looks, subsequent promotion might be more difficult because people might overlook your qualities, your competencies. That was a common theme, of being underestimated.

The definition of beauty, I just realize how varied it is and how different it is from what is portrayed by the fashion magazines. One time I was walking around with a friend and

gave her the idea for my documentary. I said, 'I'm not sure who to interview,' so we went walking around the city trying to determine if we could decide who was beautiful. I think she was very influenced by the retouched images and all the effort that goes into making a woman beautiful in the media because she couldn't find anybody who she thought was beautiful. And actually I couldn't either. I can't... 'Oh there, there it is, right there'. And if one of us thought, 'There it is. She's really beautiful,' the other one went, 'What?'

And the thing is that we buy it. But if you tried it [trying to find the ideal beauty] in real life, it doesn't work. That really threw me for a loop: who to interview. And I'm glad that I took referrals because I would have failed if I had just chosen the ones that I thought were beautiful, because it would have just been my opinion. And my suspicion that being beautiful doesn't bring the happiness that people think it brings really rang true in the documentary. I'm just wondering if I probably should do a sequel because I got the sense from the audience that I hadn't quite finished the documentary.

I'm Pilipino, so I connected with the exact opposite side of the world where being too skinny is a bad thing; it's not as attractive. Well, now they're being more influenced by the media so I think that's changing and now. I'm starting to hear about diets and eating disorders where it was so unheard of when I was living there as a little girl in the 60s.