



Docurama Q&A with Roger Weisberg, Co-director of AGING OUT

Docurama: What made you choose this topic?

WEISBERG: As I prepare to send the last of my three kids off to college, I'm struck by how much support my children continue to receive even after they "age out" of our home. They know that they can count on our continued financial and emotional support, and most importantly, they know they're always welcome home. In contrast, most young people who age out of the foster care system at about the same age have no stable home or parents to whom they can turn. The very system that removed these abused and neglected children from their homes discharges them, usually at age 18, to fend for themselves with little or no support whatsoever.

I know that my kids will invariably face some tough times as they navigate the thorny transition from adolescence to independent living. *AGING OUT* helped me grasp how much tougher this transition is for young people who've been abused and neglected, shuttled between numerous foster care placements, and suddenly find themselves on their own. In making *AGING OUT*, I wanted take viewers inside the embattled world of teenagers in foster care to reveal the tremendous obstacles they face as they try to become self-sufficient adults.

I still don't fully understand how some young people can find the inner strength to cope with early childhood trauma, while others can't. But, *AGING OUT* made me realize something I should have known from the start. In order to make a successful transition to independence, teens aging out of foster care need many of the same things my own kids need – some continued financial support until they can stand on their own two feet, a safe place they can call home, and most of all, adults who truly care about them.

After watching *AGING OUT* I hope that viewers will become more supportive of policies and services that can enable teenagers in foster care to make successful transitions to adulthood. And, for young people in foster care who see the program, I hope *AGING OUT* along with its companion web site and outreach campaign will illustrate some of the educational, housing, employment, and mentoring opportunities that can ease the transition to independent living. Our ultimate objective is to transform the way individuals and communities view their responsibilities to young people transitioning out of the foster care system.

Docurama: How did you work with the Department of Social Services? Where they amenable to the making of a film?

WEISBERG: In trying to identify teens in foster care to participate in this production, we approached many government agencies as well as several public and non-profit foster care agencies. Fortunately, we were able to offer these authorities an opportunity to screen a recent production about two brothers in foster care called *WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN*. This PBS production had recently won a dozen top film festival awards as well as an Academy Award nomination. Still, it was not always easy to convince child welfare agencies to support and participate in our film. The outcomes for teens aging out of foster care are so bleak that many agencies worried that they might appear culpable for not adequately preparing these young

people to survive on their own. However, we ultimately were able to find several extremely dedicated government officials as well caring, conscientious social workers that were willing to participate and lead us to prospective subjects.

Docurama: How did you select the three subjects of the film?

WEISBERG: We followed a dozen subjects in three regions of the country for over a year as they were discharged from the foster care system and began to try to fend for themselves. We spent a year in the editing room and ultimately arrived at a structure that interwove the struggles of three of our twelve subjects. We chose those stories that reflected the greatest diversity and that had the greatest dramatic arch. For example, one subject became homeless and landed in jail; one had a baby and went on welfare; and one received a scholarship to a prestigious university but struggled with drug addiction and suffered an emotional breakdown. Despite their struggles, *AGING OUT* also shows these teenagers using the resiliency they developed during their years “in the system” to take control of their lives.

Docurama: What was your biggest challenge during shooting?

WEISBERG: Since we were following a dozen teens for more than a year before, during, and after their discharge from foster care, our biggest challenge was to be there to cover the significant moments in their lives. One challenge was to negotiate access to places like family court or juvenile correctional facilities. Another was to build up enough trust with our subjects so that they would contact us when they experienced a crisis. Fortunately, we managed to cover most of the most important moments in this tumultuous year, but the final challenge was to find a way to tell these stories if we were unable to film a significant development or a major emergency.

Docurama: Where are the teens that appeared in the film now?

WEISBERG: Since filming was completed, David spent a year living on the streets of Seattle, receiving occasional services from a drop-in center for homeless youth. Recently, he’s been drifting from one location to another with no consistent job or place to live, but he still calls his former foster parents every few months.

Daniella and Veasna had a second child and moved to Washington D.C. where they both worked for an advocacy group representing foster children. Daniella is currently working for the Child Welfare League of America, and Veasna recently enlisted in the Marine Corps.

Risa continued to battle drug addiction while struggling to stay in school and hold a job. She bounced around from an independent living program, to her sister's house, to her former foster mother's house. In early June 2004, Risa had no place to live. On June 5th she was found shot and killed in an alley in downtown L.A.

AGING OUT is dedicated to Risa's memory, and the goal of helping teens leaving foster care make a safer transition to adulthood.

About Roger Weisberg:



Since 1980, Roger has written, produced, and directed 25 PBS documentaries through his production company, Public Policy Productions. These films have won over a hundred awards including Peabody, Emmy, and duPont-Columbia awards. Weisberg received an Academy Award nomination in 2001 for *Sound and Fury* and in 2003 for *Why Can't We Be a Family Again?* His current production is *Waging a Living*, about the struggles of low-wage workers to life their families out of poverty.