



Interview with ‘Waging a Living’ Director Roger Weisberg

(provided courtesy of P.O.V.)

P.O.V.: What prompted you to make "Waging a Living"?

Roger Weisberg: Like most Americans, I grew up with the idea that hard work invariably leads to success. I bought into this mythology for a long time, until — in the course of making many other films for PBS — I met lots of folks for whom this American dream was exactly that, just a dream. It could not be realized. There were too many barriers thwarting their ability to advance in the workforce and pull their families out of poverty. So I

wanted to devote our energies to looking at the lives of the so-called working poor, who were stuck in these low wage jobs and couldn't support their families.

When "Waging a Living" airs, it will mark 30 years since I went to work at WNET in New York as a producer of documentaries for public television. Most of the films that I have made have been about people grappling with problems associated with poverty. Why do I work on those kind of films? In large measure because I've had opportunities that aren't universally available, and I feel a sense of obligation to try to examine the barriers that prevent other people from taking advantage of the kind of opportunities that were made available to me. So part of my motivation for making these kinds of films is to have a creative outlet, but another part of my motivation is the fact that the journalist and policy wonk in me wants to try to make a difference and fix our broken world. I came of age in the 60s when that kind of idealism was so prevalent, and I've managed to hold on to some of it.

P.O.V.: What does it mean for someone to be one of the "working poor"?

Weisberg: Well, first of all, the words "working poor" ought to be an oxymoron. The idea that you can work full time and still be poor in this society is a real crime. And the numbers of working poor have risen so dramatically. Since 1977, there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of people working full time who are still poor. What makes this even more relevant today is the fact that Hurricane Katrina re-awoke people to the human face of poverty in our midst. All of a sudden, people started discovering that there are millions of people — actually 30 million Americans — who work full time and yet can't support their families.

P.O.V.: Why this is such a difficult topic for people to grapple with?

Weisberg: There are probably a lot of reasons that people aren't aware of how prevalent the problems of the working poor are. I think one of the reasons is that we have difficulty accepting that people can work full time and still not get ahead, can still be unable to support their families. Another reason this is such a difficult topic is because we all are

struggling in our own ways to make a living, so we may not have that much sympathy for others when we have our own day-to-day struggles making ends meet. But I want to show that it's different for folks on the bottom of that income ladder, and in many ways the situation now is different than it was years ago. My film is not really about all of the reasons the situation has changed over time: it's not about globalization; it's not about the transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy; it's not about the diminished power of labor unions today. What "Waging a Living" is really about is the impact that those forces are having on low-wage workers today. And that impact is something we all experience everyday.

For example, when I walked into the building I didn't really give much thought to the security guard, or when I bought lunch today, I didn't give much thought to the cashier who was checking me out. And we all encounter these folks every day. My film gave me, and I hope the audience as well, an opportunity to vicariously experience their struggles, their frustrations, their setbacks and their accomplishments.

P.O.V.: What are the effects of poverty on daily life?

Weisberg: Poverty is so insidious and it has so many effects on people's lives, including effects on their physical and mental health. In fact, depression is very strongly correlated with poverty. For children, there are also many risky behaviors that are associated with growing up in poverty, whether it's early and unwanted pregnancies for girls, or juvenile delinquency and criminal behavior among boys. So many of our social ills are attributable to the deprivations associated with poverty.

One of the things that was so remarkable about all of the subjects we profiled in "Waging a Living" was the fact that despite all the disadvantages they had, they maintained their belief that they were ultimately going to make it. They felt that hard work is always ultimately rewarded, and they bought into the mythology that down the road things were going to get better, even when all of the evidence of their daily lives pointed to the contrary. All of the people we profiled held on to this sense of hopefulness, and that was one of the most striking things that I noticed about them.

P.O.V.: Did making the film change you?

Weisberg: When I came home from a day shooting one of these stories, I just wanted to go and hug my kids. Making the film made me realize more and more the kinds of advantages that I have, and that my children have had, and it reinvigorates me and redoubles my commitment to wanting to make films that try to extend opportunities to other people.

There are times when you're wallowing in people's frustrations, difficulties and struggles, and it can be depressing, but they feel that they're getting a voice, that their experiences are getting affirmed and acknowledged, and so being able to give people who are usually so marginalized a voice is a very powerful thing. It makes me feel very good about being able to do what I do.

P.O.V.: How has this film changed people's perceptions and lives?

Weisberg: The presence of a camera in the lives of some of our subjects is a strong motivator for them. They are — all of a sudden — given an opportunity to articulate their own goals and aspirations, and then, having been asked to do that, they now have to live with trying to fulfill those goals and aspirations. So I think that sometimes being in the film provided that motivation that might not have been there before. A number of our subjects, on many occasions have told us that we really pushed them to do what they wanted to do, but might not have done had a camera not intervened.

There are other concrete ways in which the presence of the camera affects outcomes for these folks. I'll give you one specific example from "Waging a Living." Jean Reynolds was looking after five kids — three of her own children and two grandchildren — in her household. She was trying to meet the needs of this family on \$11 an hour, which was the maximum wage that she could earn as a certified nursing assistant. She was then confronted with a situation where she had to take emergency custody of two other grandchildren. All of a sudden, she had a household of eight people, and her income no longer stretched to cover the needs of this household. She ended up getting evicted from her apartment. She went to the department of social services and appealed for help, and they told her, "You simply make too much money to get any help." Well, we said to Jean, "why don't you appeal this decision to the supervisor, and why don't we come along and see if we can get permission to film this encounter?" All of a sudden, when social services took a look at her situation with the presence of the cameras, they realized that Jean's daughter, who is sick, qualified for assistance. Social services found a way to provide emergency assistance, and instead of ending up in a homeless shelter, Jean was able to find a place where her family could live.

The situation was a bit bizarre, because we like to have the camera there as a fly on the wall; we wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible and simply record what unfolds in people's lives, but we also can't deny the fact that the presence of the camera affects the reality that we're trying to portray. In this case, it changed reality in a very positive way for one of our subjects. Jean herself is convinced that the reason she got this emergency public assistance when she had been denied it in the past was because we came in and filmed the encounter.

The broader question about whether a film like this can influence public policy is a really difficult question that I've grappled with for many years. I'd love to believe that these films in a way contribute to policy, but it's such an intangible, ethereal kind of thing. These programs get beamed out across the country, and it's really hard to measure and quantify what kind of impact they had. I'll give you just one example where somebody claimed that a film I worked on was influential. We had been documenting what was happening to people who showed up at emergency rooms who had no health insurance and who were turned away, and a couple of these people who were quite critically ill and who were transferred to other hospitals ended up dying. In California, our film was shown to legislators, and was part of a public awareness advocacy campaign for an anti-

patient dumping bill, which was eventually passed into law. I don't think the film can take credit for that piece of legislation, but it was part and parcel of an effort to try to redress a terrible wrong in that community at that time.

I think it would be presumptuous to suggest that one film can change the world, and yet that's the position that we start with, that motivates us to make these kinds of films. We set out to try to fix our broken world, with the awareness that there are limitations to what one little film can do.

P.O.V.: What surprised you during the making of the film?

Weisberg: The single most surprising thing about making "Waging a Living" was to witness all of the frustrations and setbacks and struggles of our subjects, and to see such resiliency and hopefulness in the face of what I would have thought would be total despair. These were people who were getting beaten down day in and day out, and they still clung to this belief that ultimately they were going to get ahead. This belief is part of that American dream that we all, either subliminally or very consciously, grew up believing. You would think that the people for whom the American dream has turned out to be a false hope would no longer subscribe to it. But they do, and some of them are able to cobble together the kinds of educational training or opportunities to ultimately move ahead.

At the end of the film, we have a situation where Mary Venittelli, who had run up \$15,000 in credit card debt and was relying on food pantries to feed her children had found a way to A) get some additional education and training so she could get a better, higher-paying job, and B) found a companion and could move into a relationship that led to a marriage and a dual-income household, which essentially lifted her out of poverty.

Meanwhile, Jerry Longoria out in California is still stuck in a very low-wage job. He had to take a pay cut that he estimates will take eight years to bring him back to the base line that he started at when we started filming. But despite that, he's very active in his union and in other social welfare organizations in San Francisco, and he's now involved in a relationship that's giving him hope for the future.

Barbara Brooks, by the end of the film, realizes that without a college degree she'll never earn enough to support her family of five. What happened to Barbara was extraordinary. By doing well at work, she got a raise that amounted to \$450 a month. But she found out that with a \$450 a month raise, she was losing \$600 worth of government benefits. She said this didn't make sense, and she figured out a way that she could work part time while continuing her college education, so that ultimately when she had to leave those forms of government assistance, she could command a salary where she could be truly self sufficient. So at the end of the film, Barbara is working part time, she's going to school to complete her bachelor's degree and has hopes for the future.

Jean, by the end of the film, is still stuck in a dead-end job. She did have social services come to her rescue when she was about to be evicted, but she still feels cheated, as she

says, out of the American dream. She had no opportunity to move ahead because she can't go back to school; she has to be responsible for seven other people. So she takes care of her kids during the day. She works all night. When she sleeps is a real mystery. But she's one of those truly heroic people who has dedicated and devoted everything to her family. So it's kind of a mixed picture at the end of "Waging a Living." It's not a picture of despair, but it's not a Pollyannaish picture of everybody sailing off into the sunset to better lives.