

## Waging A Living

The term "working poor" should be an oxymoron. If you work full time, you should not be poor, but more than 30 million Americans – one in four workers – are stuck in jobs that pay less than the federal poverty level for a family of four. *WAGING A LIVING* chronicles the day-to-day battles of four low-wage earners fighting to make work pay. Shot over a three-year period in the northeast and California, this observational documentary captures the dreams, frustrations, and accomplishments of a diverse group of people who struggle to live from paycheck to paycheck. By presenting an unvarnished look at the barriers that these workers must overcome to lift their families out of poverty, *WAGING A LIVING* offers a sobering view of the elusive American Dream.

Jean Reynolds is a 51-year-old certified nursing assistant in Keansburg, NJ, who is supporting her three children and two grandchildren. She leads her union's successful struggle to increase wages, but since she's been at the same job for over 15 years, she earns the maximum wage of \$11 per hour and does not qualify for a salary increase. Jean's oldest daughter has cancer and Jean struggles to pay her medical bills along with the other household expenses. When Jean takes emergency custody of two more grandchildren, her wages no longer stretch to cover the needs of her family of eight. She falls behind on her bills and is evicted from her home. As the family faces the prospect of living in homeless shelters, Jean reluctantly turns to public assistance. Although the authorities have consistently rejected her applications in the past, they discover that Jean's sick daughter now qualifies for help. With emergency public assistance, Jean manages to find a place for her family to live but still struggles to make ends meet. Ultimately, Jean feels trapped in a dead-end job and cheated out of the American Dream.

Jerry Longoria is a 42-year-old security guard whose \$12 per hour job barely covers his modest living expenses and his rent in a single room occupancy hotel in a blighted neighborhood in San Francisco. Five years ago, Jerry was homeless and fighting a losing battle with alcoholism. Today, he is sober and manages to send his children regular child support payments. Jerry's real passion is his work for his union. He leads rallies, speaks at city council meetings, and helps organize a successful campaign to improve wages and benefits for security guards. Jerry's biggest goal is to visit his two children whom he hasn't seen in nine years. Eventually, he is able to save enough to make an emotional journey to North Carolina, but shortly after he returns, he has a disagreement with his boss and is fired. With the help of his union, Jerry finds a new job, but it pays 20% less than his old one. Jerry worries that

it will take him years to advance to his previous salary and that his plans for future reunions with his children will have to be put on hold.

Barbara Brooks is a 36-year-old single mother of five living in Freeport, New York. She grew up abused and impoverished but is determined to break the cycle of domestic violence and poverty. Barbara struggles to balance her responsibilities as a full-time college student, worker, and mother. She makes \$8.25 per hour as a counselor at a juvenile detention facility, but her earnings are insufficient to make ends meet. To supplement her wages Barbara receives a range of government benefits including Medicaid, food stamps, child-care assistance, utility assistance, and subsidized Section 8 housing. Barbara eventually receives a raise to \$11 per hour, but her increased earnings make her ineligible for most government benefits. She calculates that by earning an additional \$450 a month, she loses almost \$600 a month in government aid. Barbara is convinced that the only way to become self-sufficient is to get a college degree. When she earns her Associate's Degree, she finds a job as a recreational therapist at a nearby nursing home that pays \$15 per hour. She loves her new job with its professional status, increased earnings, and full medical benefits, but she quickly discovers that she is going backwards when her remaining government benefits are eliminated. With a heavy heart, Barbara resorts to working part-time so that her benefits can be restored while she completes her college education.

Mary Venittelli is a 41-year-old single mother of three living in southern New Jersey. She led a very comfortable middle class life until she started going through a bitter divorce. When Mary enters the workforce to support her family, the only job she finds in her rural community is a waitress position, paying \$2.13 per hour plus tips. Her evening schedule at the restaurant forces Mary to hire babysitters that she can't afford and puts enormous stress on her children. She relies on local food pantries for emergency food, borrows money from friends, and runs up \$15,000 in credit card debt to pay her household bills. She loses her car and is afraid she will lose her house. Ultimately, her divorce settlement stabilizes her financial predicament, but she realizes that her financial future is not secure. Mary returns to school to acquire new computer skills and begins to build a new life for her family.

*WAGING A LIVING* is produced and directed by Roger Weisberg whose twenty-five previous documentaries have won over a hundred awards including Emmy, Peabody, and duPont-Columbia awards. He received an Academy Award® nomination in 2001 for *SOUND AND FURY* and in 2003 for *WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?*. Weisberg's Co-Producer/Co-Director in New York is Eddie Rosenstein whose documentaries have aired on PBS, HBO, ABC, The Discovery Channel, American Movie Classics and

MTV. Among his recent credits are *A TICKLE IN THE HEART* and the award winning *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MR. ALLEN*. Weisberg's Co-Producers/Co-Directors in California are Frances Reid and Pamela Harris. Their work has received dozens of top honors including Academy Award® nominations for *LONG NIGHTS JOURNEY INTO DAY* and *STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART*.