

A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE
DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT
ROGER WEISBERG

Over the past two decades I have produced and directed twenty social issue documentaries, but I'll never forget my first production. It dealt with domestic violence and featured the innovative work of Sister Mary Paul and Sister Geraldine, the founders of a unique social services agency called the Center for Family Life. I was struck by their radical yet simple proposition that one could strengthen a community by supporting its children and families. After making several films about child abuse, teen pregnancy, juvenile violence, and substance abuse, I began to think that the Center for Family Life might have discovered the key to addressing some of the nation's most deeply entrenched social problems. I started to view the social pathologies that I was examining in my other films as symptoms of the broader problem of family dysfunction. If Sister Mary Paul and Sister Geraldine were right, these anti-social behaviors would begin to disappear if families were healthier and more nurturing.

I kept in touch with the Center over the years and often wondered how I could illustrate their unique brand of community social work in a documentary film. In 1997, I met Murray Nossel, a professor at the Columbia Graduate School of Social Work. Murray was in the middle of conducting oral histories of some of the Center's clients for his dissertation. We discovered that we shared the same admiration for the Center for Family Life and the same aspiration to capture their work on film. Once we decided to join forces, we faced the difficult task of finding the right personal narrative that could illuminate the work of the Center without being too promotional or didactic.

The solution turned out to be a fortunate coincidence. In 1980 while I was making a film about juvenile crime, the Center introduced me to a number of street gang leaders including Cisco Santiago. When Murray and I returned in 1997, we discovered that the Center was still working with the same Santiago family that terrorized the neighborhood two decades ago. Cisco had become a police officer and was struggling with his sister to raise the next generation of teens who were just as wild as their predecessors. We decided to follow the second generation of this troubled family in order to capture their hopes, struggles, and continuing relationship with the Center for Family Life. For three years we chronicled the painful efforts of a mother and stepfather to raise teenage children who drop out of school, join gangs, have babies, attempt suicide and resort to violence in the home. But more importantly, we documented how an extraordinary nun was able to have a powerful impact on a very troubled family.

Unfortunately, documentaries often get a bad rap. For many people watching a documentary is like eating spinach - it's good for you even though it doesn't taste good. But, I believe documentaries can have every bit as much drama and pathos as the best fiction features. A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE evolved in ways that astonished us and could never have been predicted, much less scripted. The kind of realism, intimacy, candor, and raw emotion that we were fortunate enough to capture is what motivates me to continue to make non-fiction films.