

A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE

Twenty years ago we came to Sunset Park, Brooklyn to make a film about juvenile crime. At about the same time we began profiling gang members in this dangerous community, two nuns - Sister Mary Paul and Sister Geraldine - moved into the neighborhood and founded the Center for Family Life. They believed they could strengthen this troubled community by supporting its children and families. The gang violence did not stop overnight, but slowly many gang leaders like "Stingray" and "Cisco" Santiago turned to the Center for Family Life as an alternative to the streets. Twenty years after completing our film on juvenile crime, we returned to Sunset Park and discovered that the Center was still working with the same Santiago family that terrorized the neighborhood two decades ago. A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE follows the next generation of the Santiago family for three years, chronicling their aspirations, daily struggles, and continuing relationship with Sister Geraldine and the Center for Family Life.

The film opens with sixteen-year-old Luis and his gang breaking the law on the streets of Sunset Park. In rapid succession, Luis quits his job as a counselor at one of the Center for Family Life's after-school programs, drops out of school, gets his girlfriend pregnant, threatens his mother and stepfather with a knife, and is thrown out of his home. Sister Geraldine intervenes in an effort to resolve this crisis and put an end to the family violence. We witness painful arguments and moving counseling sessions as this embattled family struggles to remain intact. Ultimately, Luis is able to reconcile with his parents after he finds a job and takes responsibility for his new family.

Just as Luis appears to be resolving many of his problems, his fourteen-year-old sister, Elena, becomes pregnant and stops attending school. Like her brother, she resorts to violence in the home and on the streets. Elena's parents consider placing her in a group home for adolescents because she refuses to return to school or care for her new baby. Elena becomes deeply depressed and repeatedly tries to kill herself. Once again, Sister Geraldine intervenes, working with the family to help Elena cope with her anger and depression. Although Elena's family readily admits that they are hardly the "Brady Bunch," our cameras are privy to a remarkable transformation. Despite all the misunderstanding, anger, and violence, this troubled family is able to overcome its differences and become a stronger, more loving family.

During our third year of filming, Sister Geraldine becomes terminally ill with cancer. She chooses not to reveal the severity of her illness to the family and continues to counsel them even from her hospital bed. The film ends on a bittersweet note at a memorial celebrating her life. The entire Santiago family reflects on the meaning of her life, her selfless energy, and her ability to help people realize their fullest potential.

A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE is produced and directed by Roger Weisberg and Murray Nossel. Weisberg's twenty previous documentaries have won over seventy awards including Emmy, Peabody, and duPont-Columbia awards. His 1993 documentary, ROAD SCHOLAR, and his recent Academy Award nominated documentary, SOUND AND FURY, were distributed theatrically before airing on PBS. Murray Nossel is a clinical psychologist, ethnographer and social worker. Nossel is on the teaching faculty at Columbia University School of Social Work and recently completed his doctoral dissertation about the anthropological implications of time in social work practice at The Center for Family Life.

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