

AGING OUT

WRITTEN, PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY
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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'VE GROWN
UP IN FOSTER CARE AND SUDDENLY
YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN?

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PRESS RELEASE

**FROM FOSTER CARE TO INDEPENDENCE—
THREE YOUNG PEOPLE “AGE OUT”
AND DISCOVER THEY’RE ON THEIR OWN**

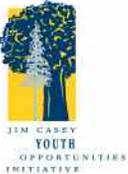
AGING OUT, 90-Minute Film by Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth,
Premieres **Thursday, May 26, 2005** on PBS

Navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood is challenging for even the most mature and privileged youth. But for three young people raised in foster care in New York and Los Angeles, making the transition to independent living is considerably more difficult.

These three compelling subjects—David Griffin, Risa Bejarano, and Daniella Anderson—represent about 20,000 young people in foster care who “age out” every year, typically at age 18. After years, if not lifetimes, of being supervised by government foster care agencies, these young people are suddenly forced to fend for themselves often with no stable home, meager resources, and little preparation to survive on their own.

AGING OUT—a new documentary by Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth premiering during National Foster Care Awareness Month on **Thursday, May 26 (2005) from 10 -11:30 p.m. ET** on PBS (check local listings) - chronicles the daunting obstacles that these foster care “veterans” encounter when they are discharged. As they become parents, or battle drug addiction, or face

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homelessness, or even end up in jail, one constant remains—a resiliency developed during their years “in the system” that drives them to take control of their lives.

AGING OUT is a production of Public Policy Productions in association with Thirteen/WNET New York. Funding is provided by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Casey Family Programs.

Interweaving the unpredictable and dramatic stories of David, Risa and Daniella, this 90-minute film is more than a dark chronicle of young people who move from foster care into the welfare, mental health, and criminal justice systems. This emotionally complex documentary is also a deeply affecting portrait of the struggles of three young adults to overcome the scars of their troubled childhoods in order to realize their dreams of independence and fulfillment.

“I want to make a life I can call a life.”

Abandoned by his mother when he was just six weeks old, 18-year-old **David Griffin** looks back on a life in more than 20 foster care, mental health, and juvenile justice facilities. Despite an early, loving foster home with Bob and Pearl Galasso, young David, seen in early home movie footage, shows both an innocence as well as a violent temper. Pearl Galasso tells of awakening to the fact that “something’s just not right with David,” while Bob recalls “he had a monster inside of him.”

Having had “like, 30 mothers and fathers,” David has episodes of violence, frequently disappearing for days at a time on drug and petty-crime binges. He endures homelessness and incarceration, experiencing the typical alienation and furies of many teens but without the anchor of a real family. When David returns to the Galassos thirteen years after leaving their home and begs them to let him stay,, they take him in for a couple of months before his behavior once again makes it impossible for them to support him..

Turned down by the military due to his psychiatric record, David has few alternatives. He says, “Wwhat I see happening to me in the future is either being on the streets or in jail.” Despite his despair, David resolves, “I want to start a new life.” Responding to the romance but clearly not the reality of hitting the road, David declares, “I’m going to go up to Alaska ...Nobody knows who I am. ... The only way I’m gonna make it is if I do it on my own.”

“I won’t mess up.”

Abused and sexually molested as a child, and shuttled between a dozen different Los Angeles foster homes for six years, **Risa Bejarano** manages to become the first member of her family to advance past the tenth grade. Comfortably nestled in the loving home of her foster mother, Delores Ruiz, Risa attends her high school prom and graduates with several scholarships. “She made it,” says Delores with pride as Risa prepares to attend the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Despite her ambition, the toll of part-time jobs, the demands of her studies, and the temptation of widely available drugs prove to be a formidable challenge to Risa during her freshman year. She ends up taking, by her own admission, “all drugs except heroin.” On academic probation after her first college quarter, Risa has no place to live during the breaks in the academic year. When she moves in with her sister, Alejandra, she succumbs to an atmosphere of partying and recklessness. After a Mother’s Day break spent with her biological mother and some siblings, Risa suffers a psychotic episode that causes her to be admitted to a hospital. “I’m worried that she lost it for good,” says her UC Santa Barbara roommate, Ashley.

Delores, with six foster care kids already living with her, takes Risa back into her crowded home, where Risa begins a slow but encouraging recovery. She enters a local community college and gets a part-time job at a nearby grocery store. As she makes plans to move into her own apartment, Risa says optimistically, “Now I can start all over again.”

“We’ve come this far. Definitely we can make it.”

Daniella Anderson reported her abusive father to the authorities when she was fifteen and spent the next five years in ten different group homes in New York City. Expressing her frustration with her multiple foster care placements, Daniella explains, “You can’t have this institution being a parent to kids.” At age 20, defiantly longing to leave the ongoing supervision of the system, she juggles her college career with the challenges of maintaining her relationship with her Cambodian-born boyfriend, Veasna Hover, who’s also in foster care, and raising their newborn son, Elijah.

Despite her struggles, Daniella displays an unusual degree of maturity, intelligence, and determination. As Veasna slowly comes to terms with the sobering realities of paying rent and putting enough food on the table, his number-one fear, expressed to Daniella, is that “someday, we’ll get into a big argument. I guess that’s my only fear, just to not be with you.” With affection and grace, Daniella is able to reassure Veasnahim, all the while admitting, “I couldn’t do it without Veasna.”

After their final discharge from the foster care system, the couple moved to Hartford but were forced to go on welfare while Daniella attended Trinity College on a full scholarship and Veasna worked a few part-time jobs. Daniella, with her sunny optimism, declares, “It’s refreshing to know we have support. The only thing is, I wish that it had come from family instead of a system.”

After several difficult months trying to make ends meet, Daniella and Veasna decide to marry. Veasna proudly declares, “We got off welfare, so I don’t feel the state is paying for my wedding.” Their wedding ceremony, however, does not follow the typical Hollywood script. Veasna gets so drunk the night before that he ends up on life support in a local hospital. Daniella is two-and-a-half hours late, admitting she wondered if she was going to regret being married. “But if that was the worst day of our lives,” she says later, “we’re scot-free.” As **AGING OUT** ends, the couple is married in a sunny outdoor ceremony, Daniella radiant in a full-length wedding gown, Veasna repentant and sober, and Elijah smiling and napping.

Where Are They Now?

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. He is now hitchhiking across America. **Daniella** and Veasna had a second child. They recently moved to Washington D.C. where they worked as advocates for teens in foster care. They both plan to return to college. **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 her car in Los Angeles.

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

Biographies

AGING OUT is written, produced, and directed by **Roger Weisberg**. His 25 previous national public television documentaries have won over 100 awards including Emmy, Peabody, and duPont-Columbia Awards. Several of his films were distributed theatrically before airing on PBS, including *Road Scholar* and his two recent Academy Award-nominated documentaries, *Sound And Fury* and *Why Can't We Be A Family Again?*

Vanessa Roth, the Co-Producer/Co-Director of **AGING OUT**, has worked as a documentary producer and director for the past ten years. After receiving her Masters Degree in social work from Columbia University, Vanessa went on to make the duPont-Columbia Award-winning film, *Taken In: The Lives Of American Foster Children* and the Sundance 2002 premiere, *Close To Home*.

Discussion Guide

Additional information, including a discussion guide for **AGING OUT**, is available online from PBS (www.pbs.org/agingout) and from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (www.jimcaseyyouth.org).

Credits

Written, Produced and Directed by Roger Weisberg. Co-Producer/Co-Director: Vanessa Roth. Narrator: Jay O. Sanders. Music: Mark Suozzo. Editors: Sandra Christie and Christopher White. Associate Producers: Deborah Clancy and Jessie Pepper. **AGING OUT** is a production of Public Policy Productions, Inc. in association with Thirteen/WNET New York. Executive in Charge of Production for Thirteen/WNET New York: Stephen Segaller.