

Co-Director's Statement

Vanessa Roth

The day that most defined the direction my life has taken as a social worker and documentary filmmaker was the day my sister joined my family. She was eight months old and was flown along with fifty other Korean babies from foster homes and orphanages in Seoul to adoptive families in Los Angeles. I was eight years old at the time. When I held my sister that day at the airport, and she smiled at me, I wondered even then what led her biological mother to abandon her. I tried to imagine what this little person's short life had been like for the 8 months she lived with temporary caregivers. As we left the airport with my new sister in my mom's arms, she was suddenly and forever part of my family.

My sister was in foster care for a brief, though developmentally, emotionally and psychologically profound time in her life. I am convinced that those initial life experiences have given her extraordinary coping skills but have also left tragic wounds that can never heal. This mix of early independence and profound internal damage is just what I have found in the children I worked with as a social worker in the foster care arena in my first film, *TAKEN IN: The Lives of America's Foster Children*, and more recently in the courageous young adults I got to know while making *AGING OUT*.

I met both Risa and David on the eve of their transition from living in foster to living "independently." What I found from the moment I first talked to them both was that these teens did not need to be introduced to independent living; independence had been forced on them from the time they were born. David had lived in over 20 foster homes before he turned 18 and Risa had gotten herself admitted to the University of California at Santa Barbara despite frequent moves and relentless family struggles. For their whole lives, these young people were forced to rely on their own instincts with no consistent source of support or stability to guide them. What they lacked most growing up and needed even more during their transition into adulthood were not programs to teach them how to be on their own, but relationships with people who passionately believed in them and could make them feel part of something.

Long after production ended on *AGING OUT*, I am left grappling with complicated questions surrounding what young people like David and Risa need most to help them become successful adults. Obviously, there are no easy answers and no one target to blame for their difficult lives, but in the end, I hope that *AGING OUT* can challenge viewers and inspire new program ideas by putting a human face on the thousands of kids growing up and aging out of foster care.