



Broken Places

a film by Roger Weisberg

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many are strong at the broken places”

— Ernest Hemingway
A Farewell to Arms

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BROKEN PLACES, our 33rd documentary, poses the complex question of why some children are permanently damaged by early adversity while others are able to thrive. To help answer this question, we dug into 40 years of our film archives to update a few of the stories of children growing up in difficult circumstances that we filmed decades ago. It turns out that some of these children were so scarred by abuse and neglect that they are now in mental institutions, correctional facilities, or drug rehabilitation centers. A few died prematurely. However, there are others who managed to overcome comparable childhood stress and are now healthy, self-sufficient adults. In BROKEN PLACES, viewers are given a unique time-lapse perspective, witnessing how a few of these troubled children evolved into the adults they are today.

We profiled Bobby Gross in our 1988 film, OUR CHILDREN AT RISK, when he was an angry 5-year-old growing up in extreme poverty. He was already showing signs of aggressive anti-social behavior at home and failing in school. We filmed Bobby being examined by one of the nation's most renowned pediatricians, Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, who painted a bleak future for Bobby in the absence of sustained early intervention. Dr. Brazelton's prediction turned out to be eerily prescient when we revisited Bobby three decades later. We learned that he ended up spending his teenage years in and out of mental institutions and his twenties in and out of prison. He briefly married and had a son, but the authorities terminated his parental rights and placed his son in foster care after Bobby was incarcerated multiple times for abusing his wife and child. At age 35, Bobby's sole source of support is social security disability.

While it's sad to see the toll that childhood adversity can take, it's tremendously uplifting to see the remarkable display of resilience shown by people like Daniella Anderson. When we first filmed Daniella 16 years ago, she was bouncing around the foster care system after being severely abused and neglected as a child. While living in a group home, Daniella fell in love with Veasna Hover, who also grew up in the foster care system after his parents were murdered in Cambodia. They had their first child while they were both still living in separate group homes and had a second child a few years later. When we revisit Daniella after 16 years, we learn that Veasna began to repeat a deeply entrenched pattern of abuse, forcing Daniella to run away with her kids to a homeless shelter. Despite the enormous obstacles she continues to face, we watch as Daniella works full time while completing her college degree and raising her 12-year-old daughter.

To further explore how adversity impacts children differently, we revisit Danny and Raymond Jacob who were the principal subjects 20 years ago in our Academy Award-nominated film WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN. We chronicled the struggle of these brothers after their mother abandoned them at a young age when she became addicted to crack cocaine. Fast-forward twenty years, and we see that Danny went on to attend college, host a radio talk show, and coach a basketball team for at-risk youth. His younger brother, Raymond, had a harder time overcoming his traumatic childhood and began having hallucinations in his teens. He suffered a mental breakdown, was hospitalized over a dozen times, received a diagnosis with manic depression, and currently draws social security disability.

BROKEN PLACES interweaves these poignant longitudinal narratives with commentary from a few nationally renowned experts in the fields of neurobiology and child development. These experts weigh in on the far-reaching impact of childhood trauma as well as the key relationships and interventions that either failed our subjects or helped them overcome the obstacles they faced. Although there have been other documentaries on this topic, none have been able to present the devastating effects of childhood adversity or the remarkable characteristics of resilience in the context of stories that span decades.

BROKEN PLACES is written, produced and directed by Roger Weisberg, whose 32 previous documentaries have won over a hundred and fifty awards including Emmy, duPont-Columbia, and Peabody awards, as well as two Academy Award nominations. BROKEN PLACES builds on Weisberg's extensive body of work and represents the culmination of four decades of documenting the struggles, aspirations, and achievements of disadvantaged Americans.