

NO TOMORROW
Vanessa Roth
Director's Statement

My goal as a filmmaker has always been to empower vulnerable young people by giving them an avenue to tell their story. But, after the brutal murder of Risa Bejarano, I was unsure I ever wanted to make another documentary again.

During the production of Roger Weisberg's and my previous film, *AGING OUT*, Risa and I became very close. I documented the moments Risa was most proud of in her life, and I witnessed the complex internal struggles she encountered as she made the transition from foster care to independent living. After *AGING OUT* was completed and broadcast, Risa and I stayed in close contact. I was often a source of support to Risa as she faced numerous obstacles, but I also questioned the appropriate way to offer her guidance in my role as filmmaker-turned-friend. Nonetheless, Risa's foster mother, and Risa's sister, and I stayed in touch, and we all did what we could to help Risa through her difficult struggles.

Then Risa was murdered. It was devastating. A life with such strong potential, talent and gifts was cut far too short. In the days and months after her murder, all of us who loved Risa were left to wonder whether we had done enough to help support this young fragile life.

Much of this questioning arose because Risa was a girl who did all she could to support others. In fact, she decided to participate in *AGING OUT* as much to process her own experiences in the foster care system as to help empower other young people who had grown up in similar circumstances. Her greatest wish was that her story would make a difference in someone else's life.

When Roger and I learned that our film about Risa's last year of life would be used in the penalty phase of the trial of Juan Chavez in order to help convince the jury that he deserved the death penalty, we knew that this use of her story would not have been what she would have wanted. It was at that point that I felt compelled once again to join Roger in making a new film about another tragic young life and a broken system.

In the making of *NO TOMORROW*, it was the persistence of conviction of Roger Weisberg and the sensitivity and talent of our editor, Tom Haneke, that gave me a new lens in which to see my role in Risa's life and in her death. Though I will always be haunted by her loss, I have come away with an understanding that it was only in my role as a filmmaker that I had the unique opportunity to give Risa a voice to share her very important life story. After her death, I began to ask difficult questions about the complexities of our criminal justice system. I began to understand the jury's difficult process and the distinct points of view of the detectives, lawyers, and judge involved in the trial. I was able to learn about the young man who took Risa's life and the family that lost him. I came to appreciate the complex policy questions raised by this death penalty trial. But most of all, I was able to provide an avenue for Risa's friends and family to have a part in telling the story of this young woman they all loved so dearly.

So, as *NO TOMORROW* now makes its way into the world and challenges people to think in new ways about the death penalty, our criminal justice system, and the vulnerable young people in all of our communities, I can only hope it's what Risa would have wanted.