

When a young woman featured in a recent documentary is murdered, the film itself becomes central to whether her killer lives or dies.



# NO TOMORROW

a film by Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth

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*NO TOMORROW* focuses on the murder of Risa Bejarano, the principle subject of *AGING OUT*, our recent film about teenagers leaving foster care. *NO TOMORROW* explores how a film about Risa's last year of life unexpectedly became the centerpiece of a homicide investigation and a trial that would determine whether the alleged killer would live or die.

In September 2007 Juan Jose Chavez went on trial for murder in Los Angeles Superior Court in front of Judge Lance Ito, who became famous for presiding over the O.J. Simpson trial. Chavez was accused of three homicides – killing two young people in a gang motivated rampage and then killing Risa Bejarano, a potential witness, a week later in order to prevent her from talking to the police.

The district attorney decided to seek the death penalty, and during the penalty phase of the trial, he showed *AGING OUT* in order to heighten sympathy for Risa Bejarano and antipathy for Juan Chavez. The defense argued vigorously that the film would be too emotional and prejudicial to his client. He also argued that no one had created a documentary about the defendant, Juan Chavez, which could arouse comparable sympathy for him. Like Risa Bejarano, Juan Chavez was abused and neglected as a child and grew up in extreme poverty, but his defense attorney only had a few childhood snapshots to show the jury. Ultimately, the judge allowed *AGING OUT* to be shown, and a few days later the jury returned a verdict of life without parole for the first two murders and the death penalty for the murder of Risa Bejarano.

Ironically, we created *AGING OUT* in order to illustrate how difficult it is for teenagers to overcome the scars of abuse and neglect. Now we were confronted with the prospect that our film helped convince a jury to give the death penalty to a young man who had suffered the same traumatic childhood experiences as Risa Bejarano in *AGING OUT*. Having failed to protect Chavez as a child, and having failed to protect the community from his violent behavior as a teenager, the state is now poised to execute him. By painting an intimate portrait of the tragic end of two young lives, *NO TOMORROW* provides a dramatic window into the complexity and controversy surrounding capital punishment.

*NO TOMORROW* covers the trial's most dramatic moments including Judge Ito's chilling death warrant in which Chavez is remanded to death row at San Quentin Prison to be put to death by lethal injection. We hear from the district attorney, the chief homicide detective, several eyewitnesses to the murders, as well as Risa's former foster mother and friends from high school and college. We also interview the defense attorney, the defendant's family members, and the key defense witness during the penalty phase of the trial. Finally, we speak with eight of the twelve members of the jury who explain the burden of the decision they faced, their reactions to the evidence that was presented in court, and their process in reaching their verdict.

Although there have been other documentaries about the death penalty, there are two unexpected developments that make *NO TOMORROW* unique. First, we shot fifty hours of footage documenting what turned out to be the last year of the victim's life, and second, the film that emerged from that footage became a critical tool for the prosecution to convince the jury to impose the death penalty. While our coverage of the trial and our interviews with the trial's participants focus on whether Juan Chavez committed the murders and deserves to die, *NO TOMORROW* also addresses the broader question of whether the state deserves to kill him. Although some viewers initially might feel that executing Chavez would be a legitimate human reaction to the heinous crimes he committed, *NO TOMORROW* makes viewers question whether the administration of the death penalty is too imperfect, costly, discriminatory, and arbitrary to be a legitimate public policy. To help us address these far-reaching questions, we interview some of the nation's leading death penalty experts. They do not speak in merely abstract philosophical terms about the death penalty, but they apply their expertise to the specifics of the Chavez case and became fully integrated into the trial's contentious debate over the appropriate punishment. Ultimately, *NO TOMORROW* not only takes viewers inside a suspenseful death penalty trial, it challenges their beliefs about capital punishment.

*NO TOMORROW* is produced and directed by Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth, the filmmakers that created *AGING OUT*. Weisberg's 30 previous films have earned over 100 awards, including Emmy, duPont-Columbia, and Peabody awards, as well as two Academy Award nominations (in 2001 for *SOUND AND FURY* and in 2003 for *WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?*). Vanessa Roth is an Academy Award, duPont-Columbia, and Sundance award-winning filmmaker. Some of her films include *TAKEN IN: THE LIVES OF AMERICA'S FOSTER CHILDREN*, *CLOSE TO HOME*, *THE THIRD MONDAY IN OCTOBER*, *FREEHELD*, and the upcoming *TEACHER SALARY PROJECT*.