

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Like many of my peers, I grew up believing in the American work ethic – the belief that hard work will invariably lead to economic success. Yet, the hard-working low-wage earners we met while making *WAGING A LIVING* felt trapped in poverty by dead-end jobs. Some worried that their earnings were failing to keep up with their bills, while others despaired that they were unable to provide their families with the same standard of living that they enjoyed growing up. They all believed in the American dream but discovered that the ladder out of poverty was steeper than they imagined.

Virtually all of my previous twenty-five films have taken viewers inside the lives of people grappling with problems associated with poverty. A few years ago when I made the PBS documentary, *ENDING WELFARE AS WE KNOW IT*, I discovered that most of the people that moved from welfare to work were unable to find jobs that paid a living wage. We succeeded in getting millions of Americans out of the welfare system without getting them out of poverty. The daily struggles of these working poor families became the inspiration for *WAGING A LIVING*.

The percentage of workers trapped in poverty rose 50% between 1979 and 2000, and today thirty million Americans- one out of four workers – earns less than the federal poverty level for a family of four. Even more unsettling, most economists believe that families need to earn about twice the federal poverty level to be self-sufficient. One of the most disturbing trends is the rapid growth of income inequality. Between 1997 and 2000, incomes for the top 20% of wage earners rose 33% while incomes for the bottom 20% fell 9%. It is a sad irony that a growing number of full time workers are unable to provide the basics for a decent life in a society that supposedly values and rewards hard work.

In *WAGING A LIVING* I wanted viewers to understand what it's like to work hard, play by the rules, and still not be able to support a family. All of us benefit from the hard work of the janitors and security guards in the offices where we work, the waiters and bus boys in restaurants where we dine, the maids and porters in the hotels where we sleep, and cashiers and clerks in the stores where we shop, but we seldom get to know much about these workers whom we take for granted. I wanted to bring viewers inside the daily grind of the nameless people we encounter every day who struggle to survive from paycheck to paycheck. I chose a cinema verite style that enables viewers to vicariously experience the aspirations, achievements, and frustrations of four low-wage earners in the Northeast and California. I hope that the audience comes away with a deeper appreciation and respect for the people who cook our food, bag our groceries, and take care of our children and elderly. My goal is get people to take a new look at the prevailing American assumption that hard work alone can overcome poverty.

Roger Weisberg, November 15.2004