

POV



A Project of American Documentary, Inc.
KCET/WGBH/WNET



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P.O.V.'s "Waging a Living" Explores Elusiveness of American Dream, Tuesday, August 29 on PBS

Documentary Captures Dreams, Frustrations, Accomplishments
Of Four People Struggling to Live from Paycheck to Paycheck

A Co-presentation of Thirteen/WNET New York

*"An eye-opening, often heartbreaking documentary about America's working poor."
- Jeanette Catsoulis, The New York Times*

If you work hard, you get ahead. That's the American Dream in a nutshell – no matter what your race, color, creed, or economic starting point, hard work will improve your life and increase your children's opportunities. Yet, this widely held dream is out of reach for an increasing number of working Americans.

Roger Weisberg's alarming and heart-wrenching new documentary, **Waging a Living**, has its national broadcast premiere on **Tuesday, August 29, 2006** at 10 p.m., as part of the 19th season of public television's groundbreaking P.O.V. series. (Check local listings.) This timely documentary puts a human face on the growing economic squeeze that is forcing millions of workers into the ranks of the poor. Shot in the northeast and California, the film profiles four very different Americans who work full-time but still can't make ends meet. Despite their hard work and determination, these four find themselves, as one of them observes, "hustling backwards."

One in four American workers – more than 30 million people – are stuck in jobs that pay less than the federal poverty level for a family of four.ⁱ Housing costs, to name just one of several essential living expenses, have tripled since 1979,ⁱⁱ while real wages for male low-wage workers are actually less than they were 30 years ago.ⁱⁱⁱ But the new face of the working poor is overwhelmingly that of a woman struggling to support her children. Only 37% of single mothers receive child support, and that support averages just \$1,331 per year.^{iv} Nearly a quarter of the country's children now live below the poverty line.^v

What do these numbers mean in human terms? What is it really like to work full-time and remain poor? **Waging a Living** provides a sobering answer. Filmed over three years, the documentary offers intimate profiles of four working Americans – Jean Reynolds, Jerry Longoria, Barbara Brooks, and Mary Venittelli – as they struggle to lift their families out of poverty.

Good-humored and strong-willed, Jean Reynolds is a 51-year-old certified nursing assistant in Keansburg, N.J., who supports three children, including her cancer-stricken eldest daughter, Bridget, and two of Bridget's four children. She receives no help from her ex-husband. After 15 years working at the same nursing home, providing care to the infirm and dying, Jean earns the maximum

wage the home pays – \$11 per hour. Without health insurance, Jean is losing the battle to cover her daughter's medical bills and her own everyday household expenses. It isn't the life she was born into, and Jean grieves that she can't give her children what her parents gave her. Ironically, Jean leads a successful drive for wage increases that do not ultimately benefit her; she's already at "the max." So when she is forced to take emergency custody of Bridget's two other children, her situation becomes dire. Evicted from her home, with seven dependents in tow, Jean desperately turns to public assistance for the first time in her life and receives emergency aid. As grateful as she is, Jean knows all too well that the reprieve is only temporary.

Jerry Longoria is a 42-year-old security guard, whose \$12 hourly wage barely covers the basics, including a tiny room in an SRO hotel in a blighted San Francisco neighborhood. A recovering alcoholic and drug addict, now four years sober, Jerry is nothing if not a dreamer. He dreams of finding better work, meeting someone special, and finding a decent place to live. Although he manages to make child support payments every month, his fondest dream is to see his children in North Carolina after a nine-year absence. Jerry also jumps into union activism, speaking at rallies and meetings in support of a successful campaign for regular, yet modest, pay increases and health benefits for the city's security guards. With remarkable discipline, Jerry saves enough money to travel cross-country for a warm reunion with his children, but when he returns home, he loses his job after an argument with his boss. He finds another job, but at lower pay, and laments that it will take eight years just to get back to the salary he used to earn.

Barbara Brooks is a 36-year-old single mother of five living in Freeport, N.Y. Her story most graphically illustrates the hazards of what she calls "hustling backwards." Barbara, raised in abusive and impoverished homes, is poised and determined. In **Waging a Living**, she's in a grueling struggle to balance her responsibilities as a mother, full-time worker and student. As a counselor at a juvenile detention facility where she herself was placed as a teenager, she earns \$8.25 per hour and relies on a range of government services to make ends meet. Barbara dreams of a better life, which is why she continues her education despite the almost unbearable demands it places on her. The first blow comes when a favorable job evaluation brings her a promotion to \$11 per hour, but the additional \$450 she earns each month will cost her \$600 a month in lost government aid. Though being off government assistance is part of her dream, she is falling behind financially even as she succeeds at work. More determined than ever to find the answer in education, Barbara earns her associate's degree and gets a \$15-an-hour job as a recreational therapist at a nearby nursing home. But, once again, she finds her income gains are wiped out by the elimination of government benefits. Unable to support her family on her new salary, she returns to a grueling work-and-school schedule, this time to earn a bachelor's degree.

A 41-year-old single mother of three living in southern New Jersey, Mary Venittelli once led a comfortable middle-class life until it was derailed by a bitter divorce. When Mary re-enters the workforce, the only job she finds is a waitress position paying \$2.18 per hour plus tips. In her own version of "hustling backwards," Mary must now hire babysitters who eat up a major portion of her earnings. There are nights she comes home with \$30 in tips and owes the sitter \$28. Without financial help from her husband while the divorce is being settled, she relies on local food pantries to feed her family, borrows money from friends, and runs up \$15,000 in credit card debt. She loses her car and is in danger of losing her home. She also sees the impact the situation is having on her children, especially her son Quinn, who begins throwing violent tantrums. At the last possible moment, a divorce settlement and a new relationship help prevent Mary and her kids from joining the ranks of the working homeless. But Mary, having experienced how easily the coin of middle-class life can flip, is determined to rely on herself to secure her future. She returns to school to acquire new computer skills.

"In making **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," says producer/director Roger Weisberg. "It's easy to take for granted the janitors and security guards in the offices where we work, the waiters and bus boys in the restaurants where we eat, and the nurses and care-givers in the facilities where we place

our children and elderly. 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.”

“My goal,” he concludes, “was to get people to take a new look at the prevailing American myth that hard work alone can overcome poverty.”

Waging a Living is a production of Public Policy Productions in association with Thirteen/WNET New York, with funding provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

About the filmmaker:

Roger Weisberg Producer/Director

Roger Weisberg joined public television station Thirteen/WNET New York in 1976. He produced dozens of programs on subjects including aging, domestic violence, juvenile justice, consumer fraud, health care, the environment, and urban poverty. Since 1980, he has written, produced, and directed 25 PBS documentaries through his independent company, Public Policy Productions. These documentaries have won over 100 awards including Peabody, Emmy, and duPont-Columbia awards. His 1993 film, **Road Scholar**, and his 1999 film, **Sound and Fury**, had wide theatrical releases before airing on PBS. Weisberg received an Academy Award nomination in 2001 for **Sound and Fury** and in 2003 for **Why Can't We Be a Family Again?** His current production is **Money and Medicine**, about the nation's health insurance crisis.

Credits:

Producer/Director:	Roger Weisberg
Co-Producers/Co-Directors:	Eddie Rosenstein (East Coast), Frances Reid, Pamela Harris (West Coast)
Associate Producer:	Deborah Clancy
Principal Cinematographer:	Slawomir Grunberg
Editors:	Sandra Christie, Lewis Erskine, Christopher White
Original Music:	Richard Fiocca
Executive Producer:	Stephen Segaller

Running Time: 86:46

Festivals:

- *CINE Golden Eagle Award*
- Council on Foundations – *Henry Hampton Award for Excellence in Film & Digital Media*
- New Jersey International Film Festival – *Grand Prize Winner*
- Philadelphia International Film Festival – *Silver Award*
- Columbus International Film and Video Festival – *Silver Chris Award (Best of Its Division)*
- Official Selection: Cinequest Film Festival, Asheville Film Festival, Fort Meyers Beach Film Festival, Indiefest Chicago, Kansas International Film Festival, Newport Beach Film Festival, Ojai Film Festival, Pacific Palisades Film Festival, Red Bank International Film Festival, Santa Cruz Film Festival, Tiburon Film Festival, Seoul International Labor Film Festival

Original Online Content on P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov):

The **Waging a Living** companion Web site (www.pbs.org/pov/wagingaliving) offers exclusive streaming video clips from the film, a podcast version of the filmmaker interview and a wealth of additional resources, including a Q&A with filmmaker Roger Weisberg, ample opportunities for viewers to “talk back” and talk to each other about the film, and these special features:

Exclusive podcast series: Tune in during the month of August for downloadable conversations about the struggles of low-wage earners in America. Participants include *Nickel and Dimed* author Barbara Ehrenreich, *Democracy Now!* host Amy Goodman, author and economist Robert Pollin, historian Howard Zinn, filmmaker Roger Weisberg, and more guests to be announced shortly.

Co-Presenters:



Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Stage on Screen*, *Secrets of the Dead*, and *Cyberchase* – as well as the work of Bill Moyers – to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, THIRTEEN reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as The Ethnic Heritage Specials,

The Thirteen Walking Tours, *New York Voices*, and *Reel New York*. With educational and community outreach projects that extend the impact of its television productions, Thirteen takes television “out of the box.” And as broadcast and digital media converge, THIRTEEN is blazing trails in the creation of Web sites, enhanced television, CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, educational software, and other cutting-edge media products. More information about THIRTEEN can be found at: www.thirteen.org.



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and now in its 19th season on PBS, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought over 230 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. It also produces a Web site for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses our unique *Talking Back* feature, filmmaker interviews and viewer resources, and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films. *Youth Views*, P.O.V.'s youth engagement initiative, expands these efforts by working directly with youth service organizations.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Ford Foundation, PBS and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.'s Community Engagement activities and the *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston, and Thirteen/WNET New York.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.americandocumentary.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback, to educational opportunities and community participation. Cara Mertes is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

Media Sponsor:



TAPE REQUESTS: Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.

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WNET NEW YORK

ⁱ Thirty million Americans make less than \$8.70 an hour, the official US poverty level for a family of four. Source: *Business Week*, May 31, 2004 p.61. Authors relied on Economic Policy Institute and the Census Bureau for their statistics.

ⁱⁱ Housing costs have tripled since 1979. Source: Kaufman, Leslie. "Surge in Homeless Families Sets Off Debate on Cause." *National Report, The New York Times*, Tuesday, June 29, 2004. Statistics from Economic Policy Institute.

Mortgage payments, percent change graph (for families with children): increase 282% btw.1978-2001
Source: "Working Families with Children: A Closer Look at Homeownership Trends" by Center for Housing Policy, May 2004, p.5 graph.

Annual new home prices: 1980: \$64,600 2003: \$195,000. Source: National Association of Home Builders, "Annual New Home Prices, 1980-2003" www.nahb.org

Annual existing single family home prices: 1989: \$89,500 2003: \$170,000. Source: National Association of Home Builders, "Annual Existing Single Family Home Prices, 1989-2003" [Hwww.nahb.org](http://www.nahb.org)

ⁱⁱⁱ Real hourly wages for male workers in the bottom quintile: 1973 = \$9.70; 2003 = \$9.22. There has been a decrease of 4.95%, or 5%. Source: Conlin, Michelle and Aaron Bernstein. "Cover Story: Working and the Poor," *Business Week*. May 31, 2004. Statistics from the Economic Policy Institute.

^{iv} In 1997, only 37 percent of custodial mothers received child support from nonresident fathers, and the amounts they received were small, averaging only \$1,331 for the entire year (Lerman and Sorensen 2001). Source: Johnson, Richard and Melissa Favreault "Economic Status in Later Life among Women who Raised Children Outside of Marriage," *The Urban Institute*, February 2004, p. 4

^v Number of low-wage workers: 28,280,343; Total number of workers: 116,288,910. Source: *The State of Working America*, Table 5.12: Characteristics of low-wage workers, 2003. Economic Policy Institute.