

Legacy

Tod S. Lending

90 minutes, color, video, 1999

California Newsreel

Description

After a quote from W.E.B. Dubois, the film opens with an overhead shot of the Henry Horner Homes public housing project in Chicago, backed by bluesy humming. The camera comes to rest on the profile of a young woman, whose voice narrates the film. She says that this will be a story about her family over five years, and introduces herself as Nickcole Collins. We see photographs of her grandmother Dorothy, and Dorothy's two daughters Wanda and Alaisa, who have ten children between them. Bluesy singing rises. Dorothy in a sober interview in tight closeup (a feature of the cinematography throughout) stalwartly explains how the projects have deteriorated since she came to live in them decades ago. Tears well as she says she would not live here if she could afford anything else. It's hard living here, she says, wiping her tears. Two hours after the interview, Nickcole says, her cousin and best friend Terrell was killed on the streets, gunned down by another child while returning from school to be interviewed by the filmmaker. Gritty, handheld TV news footage captures the confusion immediately after Terrell's murder. Nickcole says that Terrell's mother Wanda Awas stunned, and so was my mom. The mothers are seen on the street crying; Wanda screams, "Not Terrell!," and there is a closeup of her hand. At the funeral, where the camera is positioned behind Terrell's head in the open casket, the family members are seen approaching the casket and collapsing in grief. Nickcole's voice says that the media interest in the murder was intense but "what the media never get to see is how that pain can change a family over time."

The Second Year section follows Alaisa's attempt to get off welfare. We see her in a meeting with a case officer who warns her that welfare benefits will be cut. Nickcole expresses her disappointment that her mother did not get a job, after many applications. We see Alaisa unloading boxes at holiday season in a discount store, and learn in narration that this is illegal for welfare recipients. Over scenes of Alaisa trudging toward and from appointments, Nickcole says that her mother missed computer training because she was late the first day. She says, over slow motion images signaling frustration, "Sometimes it made me angry and sometimes it made me sad for her."

The Third Year features Nickcole's success. The family is getting dressed and fixing Nickcole's hair for her high school graduation. The camera closes in on Dorothy hugging Nickcole in her graduation gown; the grandmother starts to cry and mouths, I love you. The camera follows Nickcole to a community college orientation session; she has been accepted to a program for students with poor college scores but potential. She says she wants "early education training." The camera returns to the public housing apartment and a conversation with Alaisa, who says that Nickcole showed early interest in teaching and caring for children. Nickcole says in voiceover that she wishes her mom could start over again and do things better. Alaisa says thoughtfully, with the camera tight on her contemplative face, "It's good that it's there in her mind, she'll make it." At Terrell's grave, the family unites to sing "Happy Birthday" to him--it appears that this is a ritual for them. Wanda says that it is a good thing, because it is a place to greet him and remember him. She talks about her sense of failure as a mother, and her addiction; she promises to go into treatment. The director's voice off camera asks her if she really will do that. In the next scene Wanda does go into treatment, and talks in the group about running away from home at the age of 12 and living as a prostitute on the streets.

The Fourth Year finds Alaisa winning a teacher's aide job at Nickcole's old high school, a private Catholic school. Nickcole receives an award for good grades in her community college. She comments that her mother's new job gave her important self-esteem but very poor money. Alaisa is seen doing the laundry, while Nickcole's voiceover tells us that she must do these chores at 4 am. Wanda graduates from NarcAnon; Nickcole comments that nobody from her family showed up because they didn't quite believe she would stay clean. But, she says, Wanda now has a new family. At the graduation ceremony, Wanda says, "I know who Wanda is...I put my life in God's hands." In slow motion, Dorothy is seen taking the first steps toward getting her own home, checking out houses in construction. Nickcole's narration says that an anonymous donor had given Dorothy \$10,000 toward a house when Terrell died, but that there were no houses and Dorothy didn't know how to buy one. She can now proceed--we see her handling documents with an official--because the public housing is being torn down and replaced with mixed housing. Over images of Wanda's children taking a bath, Dorothy considers whether Wanda can now take them over. Wanda is seen working with other crew members doing maintenance work in the projects. She says, "Now I feel important...I'm part of society now." Dorothy continues to look at houses. We see her touring the house she will purchase in construction. (Piano improvisation boosts a hopeful sense in the scene.) Thanksgiving inside the old apartment segues to the cemetery, and another visit to Terrell. Jack, Terrell's brother, begins to cry at his grave side. Nickcole's voiceover begins here and continues over a scene of rollerskating, in slow motion. She says that Jack had known the boy who killed Terrell, but that he had never spoken of the event. They came to know that Terrell had fought with the boy at a basketball game. Over black and white photos of Jack and Terrell she continues to explained that Jack dropped out of high school and had two children with his girlfriend. The family is seen moving, buying a Christmas tree and moving in, even as the carpenters are still installing the front steps.

The fifth year begins with a wrecking ball, as the Henry Horner Homes are seen being torn down. We see Wanda while Nickcole tells us that Wanda moved in with Dorothy for a while, and then moved into an apartment with her kids, with her mother's blessing. Alaisa passes her GED, and she is seen in a classroom; she will be a teacher. Nickcole will graduate. The film's last big scene is Nickcole getting married to Johnny, her boyfriend introduced briefly in year three. At her white-dress Catholic wedding, the vows are exchanged and the camera visits the joyful faces of all the principals in the story. "My children will have the father that I never had", Nickcole's voiceover says, "and that's the only way it can be." The wedding dancing, with Nickcole and Johnny in the center, is shown in slow motion.

In the film's coda Terrell is shown in home videos. Nickcole says, "He left us the spirit not to accept what we have but to struggle for something more...his legacy will live on...may he rest in peace." The film ends on images of Terrell.

Style/Structure

The film is highly crafted and stylized, developing a first-person style on behalf of its subjects. It does this through the narration, which was wholly written by the filmmaker with corrections for language and factual errors by Nickcole Collins; through the consistent use of very close up camerawork; and the parallel close focus on the individual lives of the family. The film announces, through narration, that this will be a story of struggle toward success, through the spur of tragedy. It carefully cues viewers to the beginnings (through titles) and ends (through slow motion and freezes) of sections. Images of Terrell begin, recur and close the film. The thesis--that his death motivated the family to succeed--is reinforced and demonstrated by the combination of narration and illustrative footage. The scenes are carefully trimmed to feature

testimonials of success--the NarcAnon speech, the mother's endorsement of her child, the moving in, the graduation hug, the wedding embrace. The closeups, the narrative control over exposition, and the closeup rendering of events highly tailors the viewer's experience to confirm the messages of hope through individual struggle. This film excellently and powerfully demonstrates the difference between a project where the point is to promote and enable self-expression among those whose expression has never been encouraged (e.g. Kelly Loves Tony, Palestinian Diaries) and one in which a story about someone is told retrospectively, and projected into their voice. It also demonstrates the difference between a diary and a memoir format. Nickcoles story makes sense looking back, and her narrative guides the viewer to interpret the meaning of the images.

Background on Director/Film

Tod S. Lending learned filmmaking, and particularly editing skills, by working on episodes of the TV show The Equalizer, before working on independent features and television in Los Angeles and Chicago. After winning an Emmy for work on an after-school special for Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Productions, he went on to form Nomadic Pictures, a production company. He was working on a three part PBS series, No Time to Be a Child, about children of poverty who were overcoming the odds, when he first learned about Terrell Collins. Over four years of producing the series, he continued to follow the family, assuming the costs of production and piggybacking on the series work. The series went on to earn many awards.

In the making of Legacy, Lending faced various challenges. Nickcole resisted his efforts to involve himself in her life, he told Pat Aufderheide; she was going to a private Catholic school where no one knew she came from the projects. Wanda took three years to give him access. Jack, Terrell's brother who did not have a happy story of success, is marginalized in the film, because, Lending said, he could not get access to Jack. The access he did win with the family is highly unusual, both because such a film requires sustained resources and because racial and class boundaries usually block access. Lending believes the family welcomed him into their lives because he promised to document Terrell, who they were very proud of. He believes he had a powerful effect on the family as well, particularly with Wanda; he persuaded a treatment facility to let her in without waiting, after she agreed to go, because she was in a film. Lending is committed to splitting any profits 50/50 with the family.

After four years of work on Legacy, he won commitment from HBO's documentary division. This commitment convinced major foundations--Annie E. Casey Foundation, MacArthur Foundation and Kellogg Foundation -- to invest in outreach for the film. Lending went on to work on a documentary about the death penalty for Court TV.

Production Context

HBO's involvement was critical to the making and distribution of the film. HBO has shown consistent interest in running occasional social issue documentaries as a complement to its more lurid, sexually-oriented documentaries ("Real Sex," "Shock Video," "Taxicab Confessions"). Having launched its service in 1979 with the attraction of more sex and violence than was available on broadcast, HBO had in the later 1980s fought for an image as one of the programming industry's senior statesmen. Sheila Nevins, who throughout the 1980s and 1990s was at the core of HBO's documentary division, found in personal-voice documentaries a way to offer both social substance and audience engagement. Professing observational cinema greats such as Robert Drew and the Maysles brothers as her heroes, she became a key figure in documentary production as HBO's documentary output rose to c. 50 films a year by the end of the 1990s. Nevins was in Legacy as typically, highly interventionist. It was HBO's involvement

in the editing, the filmmaker told Pat Aufderheide, that pushed him to switch the narrator from Alaisa to Nickcole.

Reception

The film debuted at Sundance Film Festival, and proceeded to many festivals and won a wide variety of awards (Houston Film Festival, Silver Medal; San Francisco International Film Festival, Golden Gate Award; the highly selective Cinema du reel in Paris, and many others). It was then nominated for an Academy Award in 2000. The film was shown on Cinemax in 2001 and HBO in 2002; the cablecast was postponed after its making in the hopes of its winning an Academy award nomination. It was also scheduled to be shown in limited release on public television after its HBO showcase. The film's outreach guaranteed that it would have an extensive grassroots life. Casey, MacArthur and Kellogg Foundations combined to invest in a massive outreach plan coordinated by Judith Ravitz. The plan, showcased on a website (www.legacymovie.com), featured use of the film by five major partners, including a coalition of black churches, the United Way, and the Police Boys and Girls Clubs nationally. A 35 minute version of the film was created, along with extensive viewer materials. Issues that the film addresses, directly or indirectly--welfare reform, grandparents raising grandchildren, public housing issues--provide ways for partners to showcase their own activities and materials to constituencies who may be drawn to film screening events. The film also won awards for its social action possibilities, including the Victim's Service Award of the Illinois State's Attorney's Office.

Discussion

Did this film surprise you or reveal to you something you had not known before?

Do you think this family's problems are typical or atypical, from what you saw in the film? Why?

Which stories did you find most interesting in the film? Why?

How does this film's approach compare with an Assisted video personal-voice story? What are the advantages and disadvantages? How does it reflect expectations of TV viewers? How does it differ from other documentaries on cable TV?

Further Reading

Consult the outreach website for the film, at <http://www.legacymovie.com>

Contributor: Pat Aufderheide