Social Work Alumnus Films and Produces PBS Documentary: A Brooklyn Family Tale

By Jo Kaulecker

Most students in the School of Social Work don’t usually rely on video cameras to conduct their fieldwork. But Murray Nossel, PhD ’01, is not just a social worker; he is also an artist and filmmaker. So when two of his professors told him that the Center for Family Life in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park, Nossel knew what he had to do.

Nossel graduated from the University of South Carolina in 1996 when he was completing his graduate studies at Columbia. After coming back to NYC from his home country of South Africa to pursue playwriting, Nossel found a job as a caseworker to earn a living. He had been a practicing clinical psychologist in South Africa so he knew it was a vocation that—as his refugee grandparents had always taught him—he could always fall back on while he developed his art. His three years in the social system here, however, made him question the system itself and turned him to grad- uate school in hopes of revitalizing his desire to help people.

That’s when two professors—Brenda G. McGowan, Ruth Harrigan, professor of Family and Child Welfare, and Peter Richard Hess, professor in the School of Social Work and associate director for Research and Scholarship at the Institute for Fami- lies in Society at the University of South Carolina—encouraged him to use his talents and experi- ences at the Center in Brooklyn. Because they were already conducting a four-year study on social work practice at the Center, they suggested Nossel do ethnography there. What Nossel didn’t anticipate was that the experience would profoundly affect both his career and his life.

The first time I visited the Center and met the two sisters who ran it, I was blown away,” Nossel says. “I was so impressed that they were talking about and who they were being completely authentic in terms of their practice. They operated from a set of explicit values and that impressed me.”

So Nossel asked Sister Mary Paul Janschill and Sister Geraldine Tobia if he could video tape them in their work with families. The two sisters—both graduates of Colum- bia’s School of Social Work who had moved into the neighborhood to found the center for Family Life—believed they could strengthen the troubled community by sup- porting children and families. Though the gang violence did not stop overnight, eventually many gang leaders such as “Stringray” and “Cisco” returned to the Center for Family Life as an alter- native to the streets. Sister Mary Paul and Sister Geraldine gave Nossel carte blanche to film the Center’s affairs from art installations as well as their interactions with families in the community. For the next four months, Nossel took his video camera to Sunset Park. Instead of using a tape recorder to document the work—what sociologists refer to as “participant observation”—Nossel showed his raw footage to Hess and McGowan, who immediately saw its poten- tial as a document. They encouraged him to put together a thirty-minute pilot documentary. They helped Nossel find funding—some from foundations. As a result, he spent the next three years following families in Sunset Park who had been involved with the Center for two generations. In the process, he also developed the social work tools he’d learned through his grad- uate studies from associate profes- sorships such as Jacqueline Denise Burnette and Barbara Simon. “The reliance of filmmaking were constantly challenging for me,” Nossel says. “As an instrument of knowing, I had to immerse myself in the situation. As a clinician, it was difficult not to intervene in what I saw [as I was filming].” He wanted to help. But I was wonder- fully equipped for that because the social work program trained me and gave the lens through which to approach the situation with the dis- tance it required.”

The result is A Brooklyn Family Tale, (www.pbs.org/wnetfamily- tale/index.html), a one-hour docu- mentary produced by Nossel and award-winning filmmaker Roger Weisberg scheduled to air on PBS Oct. 24. The film—which won a Cine Golden Eagle and Platinum Award for best theatrical feature documentary at the Worldfest Houston International Film and Video Festival—chronicles the struggles of the Santiago family and their unique relationship with Sister Geraldine. As the parents watch their teenage children drop out of high school and become par- ents themselves, viewers witness Sister Geraldine’s remarkable efforts and persistence in helping this family stay together. During the third year of filming, Sister Geraldine became terminally ill with cancer but chose not to reveal the severity of her illness to the family, continuing to counsel them even from her hospital bed. The film ends on a bittersweet note at a memorial celebrating her life. Each member of the Santiago family reflects on the meaning of Sister Geraldine’s life, her selfless lifestyle, and her ability to help people realize their fullest potential.

“A Brooklyn Family Tale is also part of an educational outreach campaign that coincides with the release of Hess, McGowan and Michael Boettke’s book, Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many: The Center for Family Life in Sunset Park,” published by Columbia Uni- versity Press this year. Classroom resource materials draw from both the book and the film and are being distributed to colleges, universities, social service agencies, and school districts across the country.

“I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to study the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park and to share the lessons learned with others who are com- mitted to serving families and chil- dren,” Hess says. “We hope that the voices of those who use the cen- ter’s services and of the center staff members, who bring the center’s service model to life, will inspire and instruct others. As others have emphasized, the center’s programs so clearly illustrate what can be done with and for at-risk children and their families.”

Nossel couldn’t agree more, who in addition to working currently on other documentaries, recently com- pleted his doctoral dissertation about the anthropological implications of time in social work practice at the Center for Family Life and is also on the adjunct teaching faculty at Columbia’s School of Social Work.

“The reason the film happened at all was because I didn’t need any convincing that the Center was doing something great. It was,” Nossel says. “It was completely evi- dent. So it’s a film about a family and a center, but the center is insep- arable from the families it serves. It doesn’t see itself apart from family life in Sunset Park. As Sister Mary Paul said, ‘we’re in this together’. We have hope, the community steps in and maintains hope for him or her and his or her family. That’s the role of community.’

City Leaders Offer Inspiration and Public Insight for Barnard Discussion

By Mirra Rosenberg

A standing-room only crowd packed Barnard College’s Saburber Park on October 10 for a spirited panel discussion on How To Get Out and Change the World (Or At Least New York City): Women in City Government.

“Changing the world is one of the prime aspirations of Barnard women,” said President Judith Jacob Shapira in her opening remarks. “Tonight’s panel features leaders and innovators who speak out and make waves.”

Co-sponsored by the Center for Research on Women and Urban Studies Program, the Office of the President, the Office of Alumni Affairs, and the Office of Career Development, the panel brought together such municipal luminaries as Sister Geraldine, the center’s executive director, Stacey Gottesman ’04, a recent graduate from Virginia Tech, and Sister Mary Paul Janschill, the center’s associate director. They collectively conveyed the message that women’s contributions to public service are critical to making a difference.

“Politics and public service is one of the most important ways to contribute to the world. Deci- sions that get made there affect everyone from the womb to tomb,” noted Manhattan Borough President Paul.

“Work from the ground up,” urged Pestana. “Understand what’s happening. You live here, and are as knowledgeable as anybody else. You should become involved.”

Pestana pointed out to the audi- ence that one of the great benefits of working for city government is that “you get lots of responsibility early on in city government.” She cited her own experience, not long after graduating from law school, work- ing on cases like conditions in single room occupancy buildings or the plight of prisoners who were psychi- atric patients in city hospitals. “I was debating whether I should go into psychology or law,” said Stacey Gottesman ’04, who is presi- dent of Women in Politics, a campus organization dedicated to raising campus awareness of impor- tant political issues. “I want to have an impact on people and I was inspired by Georgia’s example. I feel now I should get involved in law and politics.”

Pestana also suggested that women’s involvement at the highest levels of municipal government was critical to making a difference.

“When you appoint women to exec- utive positions, they bring different networks to the conversation,” Pestana said. “Having diversity of any kind in the room makes a difference in what kinds of names get forward- ed for positions. That’s critical to the outcome.”

And as Fields observed, “Become involved. Volunteer. You’re here at Barnard, in Manhat- tan, part of Columbia. The resources are here, the opportunities are here, and the communities are here. You’re at a place, at a time, when so much is happening. Become a part of that. Expand on the academic part of what you’re learning. Take advantage of every- thing this great city has to offer.”

Abzug, whose late mother, Bella, was a member of Congress from New York, said: “We’ve come a long way but we still have a long way to go. You have so much talent and opportunities ahead of you, but we’re reaching a scary moment in history and we need to move faster. Push, persist, and do it with heart and soul.”

From left - Georgia Pestana, Liz Abzug, Ester Fuchs, C. Virginia Fields

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A scene from A Brooklyn Family Tale, which airs on PBS October 24 at 10 pm.