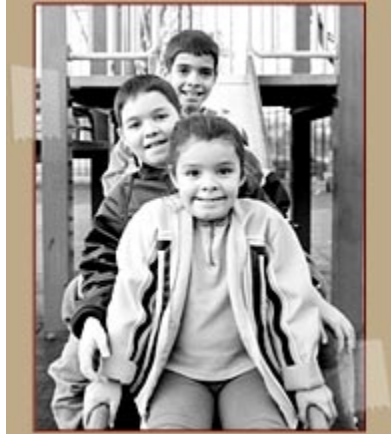


A film by Roger Weisberg and Murray Nossel



Twenty years ago we made a film in Sunset Park, Brooklyn about juvenile gangs. At about that same time, two nuns - Sister Mary Paul and Sister Geraldine - moved into this neighborhood to work with troubled youth and founded the Center for Family Life. Slowly, some of the gang leaders like "Stingray" and "Cisco" Santiago began turning to the Center for Family Life as an alternative to the streets. A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE is the story of the next generation of the same Santiago family that was terrorizing the neighborhood two decades ago. In cinema vérité style, we follow this extraordinary family for three years, chronicling their aspirations, triumphs, set-backs, and daily struggles. As the parents watch their children drop out of school, join gangs, have babies, attempt suicide, and resort to violence at home, we witness Sister Geraldine's remarkable efforts to keep this embattled family intact. – Roger Weisberg and Murray Nossel

## Discussion Questions

Developed by Peg McCartt Hess and Brenda G. McGowan

The following questions are designed to stimulate and focus classroom discussion of A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE, particularly in courses in schools of social work. The questions address various aspects of the experiences of the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family, Sister Geraldine's professional work with them, and the philosophy and service model of the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park. (To refresh your memory about the names and roles of the persons in the documentary, profiles are provided on this Web site.) Instructors and students should select those questions of greatest interest and relevance to them and their work together. The questions are grouped into seven topical areas:

- The family and family assessment
- The helping relationship
- Self-determination
- Youth/teen services
- Family-focused, community-based services
- The Center for Family Life and its mission
- Belonging to the community

Several questions refer to *Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many: The Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, Brooklyn*, a forthcoming (2002) publication by Peg McCartt Hess, Brenda G. McGowan, and Michael Botsko (New York: Columbia University Press). The book tells the story of the first twenty-two years in the life of this outstanding community institution.

This Web site includes a number of excerpts from the book. These highlight the Center's philosophy, history, and comprehensive family-focused, community-based programs as well as staff and program participants' observations about their experiences with the Center.

Drs. Hess and McGowan wish to acknowledge Susan P. Kemp, Ph.D., and Gerald Mallon, DSW, for their help in reviewing the discussion questions. Dr. Kemp is Associate Professor and Associate Dean for Professional Degree Programs, University of Washington School of Social Work. Dr. Mallon is Associate Professor and Executive Director, National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning at the Hunter College School of Social Work.

### The Family and Family Assessment

1. What do you see as the strengths of the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family and of the family's members?

2. What is your understanding of resilience? In what ways might one see the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family as resilient? In what ways can social workers promote family resilience?

3. Throughout *A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE*, the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family members articulate their perceptions of the dilemmas confronting them. What are some of the dilemmas that family members articulate? [For example: "He's gonna hurt me or I'm gonna hurt him" (Luis); "He was trying to be the father that I never had . . . but he was moving in there too fast" (Luis); "Nobody listens to me, ever lets me do what I want to" (Elena); "He keeps me occupied – I try to forget everything that goes on" (Rosa); "What's the reason that you hate me so much?" (Benny/Little).]

4. In what ways are the family's struggles related to family members' developmental ages/stages, changes in the family's composition and in family members' roles, communication patterns or other family processes, and/or family members' decision making?

5. In what ways are the family's struggles related to the family's environment and to socio-structural factors?

6. Sister Geraldine states:

"Over the years I've noticed in working with families who have histories of being beaten down, getting messages both within their own immediate family or from the world outside that they're not capable [that] they become so comfortable with the negative identities, they're not comfortable with their strengths and positives."

Have you had similar or different experiences in applying a strengths perspective in your assessment of families in your work as a social worker (or helping professional)? Do you see evidence of this with the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family?

7. In the documentary, Sister Geraldine states:

"I go beyond the act. I try to find that person behind the act, then look for who is this person, what is it that they have, what's brought them to this point in their life. That's really social work – learning what brought them to where they are."

What does this statement convey about assessment, about human behavior? In her work with the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family, what are the results of Sister Geraldine's attempts to find the person behind the act?

8. The family counseling services provided by Sister Geraldine to the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family are offered through the program referred to by the Center for Family Life staff as the Preventive Program. As described in *Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many* (see excerpts from Chapter 3 on this Web site), this program is designed to prevent child maltreatment and the unnecessary placement of children in out-of-home care. Is there a risk for placement of children out-of-the home in this family?

### **The Helping Relationship**

9. How would you characterize Sister Geraldine's relationship with the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family? With Rosa Santiago Cruz (mother)? Luis Castro (Rosa's son)? Elena Castro (Rosa's daughter)? Benny "Little" Cruz (Rosa's husband and Luis' and Elena's stepfather)? Francisco "Cisco" Santiago (Rosa's brother)?

10. What do you perceive the meaning to be to the family of their relationship with Sister Geraldine? to various family members over time?

11. Community residents who participate in the Center's programs have described staff members as "like family" and "friends." In what ways is the long-term professional relationship of Sister Geraldine with the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family similar to and different from that of a neighbor or friend? Identify the professional components of this relationship (e.g., crisis intervention). Do you also see personal

components?

12. In reflecting upon her work with the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family, Sister Geraldine comments: "I wouldn't want to become Pollyanish. People need you to be able to get in there and honestly help them, see what they're struggling with. They don't want that to be watered down. They want to be able to trust enough to be able to tell you their negative feelings about themselves, and we need to be able to honestly know those people so that we see their strengths as well."

What evidence is there that the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family trusts Sister Geraldine "enough" to be able to tell her their negative feelings about themselves? What do you believe contributes to the development of trust in a professional helping relationship?

13. Sister Geraldine has been working with different members of this family for twenty years. What do you think about such long-term involvement with any client group? What are the potential benefits and risks? Can society afford such extensive investment in any one family?

14. In *Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many*, the authors report professional and personal characteristics that Center for Family Life staff members perceive as essential to a practitioners' effectiveness in providing services such as those depicted in this documentary. (See excerpts from Chapter 3.) What are these characteristics? Which of these are demonstrated in Sister Geraldine's work with the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family?

15. Are the professional and personal characteristics identified as essential by the Center's preventive services program staff essential to any helping relationship, or do some apply more particularly in community-based family-focused services? Using the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family as a case in point, what professional and personal characteristics would be important to a practitioners' effectiveness?

16. How can helping professionals best develop these characteristics and qualities?

17. Throughout the excerpts from *Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many*, references are made to the importance and challenges of the "use of professional self." What is your understanding of "use of professional self?" Why is this important and challenging to Center staff? Do you see evidence of "use of professional self" in Sister Geraldine's work with the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family? If so, when, how, and with what results?

18. What is the appropriate use of touch by helping professionals in their use of professional self? What is your reaction to the use of touch by Sister Geraldine with the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family?

### **Self-Determination**

19. In what ways is the social work principle of self-determination reflected (or not reflected) in Sister Geraldine's work with this family?

20. Sister Geraldine asserts that:

"People need to see their ways themselves and that's not for us to define, to spell out, or to prescribe. That's not my role [as a social worker]. It's to be in the journey with people, to give them a sense of 'you can go somewhere' rather than 'you're the dregs of the earth, and we're here to save you.' It's more like 'Why are you not seeing all that you have to offer?'"

Do you agree or disagree with this statement and why?

### **Youth/Teen Services**

21. Luis Castro volunteered as a Counselor-in-Training (CIT) at a Center for Family Life after-school childcare program for four years. Throughout the period of this documentary, Elena Castro participated in the Community Arts Project and worked as a Counselor-in-Training at the after-school childcare program and summer day camp. Information regarding these Center programs is included in the excerpt on this

Web site from Chapter 5 “Supporting Families, Building Community, and Developing Children and Youth: The Community School Programs.”

What are your observations regarding Luis and Elena as they participate in these Center programs? What benefits can be achieved for adolescents who volunteer or work as counselors-in-training in neighborhood after-school and summer childcare programs? children and adolescents who participate in community arts programs? Can you imagine ways in which Luis’ and Elena’s participation in these programs may have been beneficial to them? (Refer to excerpt from Chapter 5 regarding the Center’s CIT program.)

22. The Center for Family Life in Sunset Park has been a resource for youth and a diversion from youth criminal behavior for over two decades. What do you perceive to be at the core of that resource?

23. Teen pregnancy and teen parenting are among the issues confronting the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family. Sister Geraldine states:

“I would not want to say we’re [the Center for Family Life] here because in this neighborhood most girls get pregnant early, so therefore we’re going to be here to make sure you don’t get pregnant. We just didn’t find that respectful.”

a. Do you agree or disagree with this statement and why?

She also observes:

“I’ve had as many situations where an adolescent might have a child and it was the motivation to do better as [situations where] an adolescent will have a child and the whole family goes down in poverty. I don’t know which way this family will go.”

b. What are your perceptions about “which way” this family is going and will go?

c. What supports are present for Luis and Darlene and their son Luis, Jr., and for Elena and her son Michael Matthew?

d. What challenges confront them?

e. What is your understanding of teen pregnancy and parenting and its possible consequences for adolescents and their children and for their relationships with their parents, their partners, their siblings, friends, and others?

f. Elena’s mother and stepfather express concern about the degree of responsibility Elena is assuming for her baby. What practice strategies might be used to encourage Elena to take greater responsibility for her son?

g. What are the services available to pregnant adolescents and teen parents in your community? What philosophies are reflected in the service provision? What service outcomes have you observed?

h. What is the appropriate role for social workers in teen pregnancy prevention efforts?

### **Family-Focused, Community-Centered Preventive Services**

24. Based upon their study of the Center’s programs, the authors of *Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many* identified a number of key characteristics of the Center’s family counseling services or preventive program (see excerpts from Chapter 3). What are these? Do you see evidence of these program characteristics in Sister Geraldine’s work with the family? In what ways?

25. In the excerpts from Chapter 3, the authors noted that the preventive program services reflect the program’s emphasis on (1) meeting the needs of all family members and (2) viewing the family as a system. Do you see evidence of this in Sister Geraldine’s work with this family? In what ways?

26. Based upon the excerpts of interventions in the documentary and the information regarding the family counseling program provided in the Chapter 3 excerpts, what is your understanding of what Sister Geraldine hopes to accomplish with this family? What are the purposes of her interventions with the family? What social work practice models/approaches/theories does she appear to be drawing from?
27. In describing the key program characteristics of the Center's prevention program, the authors report the staff members' frequent references to the concept of "shared parenting" and illustrate the concept with Marla's experiences with the Center (excerpts from Chapter 3). What is your understanding of this concept? Do you see evidence of "shared parenting" in Sister Geraldine's work with the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family?
28. The excerpts of family counseling meetings included in the documentary occur both at a Center for Family Life program location and in the family's home. What are the advantages and disadvantages of arranging appointments at a family's home, in one's office, in other community locations?
29. Most of the interviews Sister Geraldine conducted with the adults in the family were in the context of family sessions. What are the advantages and disadvantages of meeting with all available family members, with individual family members, and with parents without the children present? What are the advantages and disadvantages of meeting with several generations of a family together?
30. The Santiago-Castro-Cruz family is Latino. In what ways did Sister Geraldine display cultural competence in her work with this family? Are there areas in which you think she could have demonstrated greater cultural competence?
31. The Center for Family Life's preventive program practitioners identified the stresses and challenges they experienced in providing family-focused, community-centered services (see excerpts from Chapter 3). If you were providing services to the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family, what stresses and challenges do you anticipate that you would experience? What supports would be important to you?
32. In what ways are the philosophy and key characteristics of the Center's preventive program similar to or different from programs in your community or from programs with which you are familiar that are designed to prevent child maltreatment and unnecessary placement of children in out-of-home care?

### **The Center for Family Life and Its Mission**

33. In describing the Center for Family Life's philosophy and mission, Sister Geraldine states: "At any given time, any one of us who live here in Sunset Park needs something, and we have something to give, and I hope that the Center has been that place where the possibilities for that give and take place. The major goal of the Center is to help each individual person be everything they can possibly become, not to label people, to look for people's strengths, not just their pathology. The mission is to really support family life."
- a. Based upon the documentary and information from *Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many*, what is your understanding of the Center's mission? Does it appear to you that the Center is accomplishing its mission?
- b. What factors affect an agency's capacity to accomplish its mission? What similarities and differences do you see in the Center's mission and its ability to accomplish it and that of other agencies with which you are familiar?
- c. Do you believe that at any given time in your community each person needs something and each person has something to give? How might this belief shape an agency's approach to developing services and activities? To community residents' use of services?
34. In excerpts from the Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many*, the history of the Center's development over the past two decades and the principles that have guided that

development are described. The founding co-directors emphasize the importance of providing a range of non-categorical services that all families in a neighborhood can access voluntarily. What is your understanding of why they place such a high value on this?

### **Belonging to the Community**

35. Based upon impressions formed in viewing A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE, what role does the location of services in the neighborhood play in this family's service utilization? What are the benefits to families when comprehensive services are located in their neighborhoods?

36. What are the challenges faced by agencies in locating comprehensive services in neighborhoods?

37. As described in the excerpts from Chapter 1, the Center for Family Life's co-founders wanted the Center's services to belong to the community of Sunset Park. What are the benefits and challenges of such a commitment? Do you believe that the Santiago-Castro-Cruz family would say that the Center's services belong to the community of Sunset Park?

38. Does an agency's commitment to belong to the community impact its sensitivity and commitment to cultural competence? In what ways?

39. As depicted in the documentary, community members were invited by the Center for Family Life to participate in the celebration of the Center's twentieth anniversary and the celebration of Sister Geraldine's life. What is your reaction to this? What message does this convey to the Center's clients and constituents?

40. After the wedding of Cisco and Gretchen, two community residents who have a long history at the Center, Sister Geraldine comments that she sees them as the "new leaders" who can take over some of what she and others have been trying to do with the community. Is this realistic? Should a social service agency plan to have its primary functions absorbed by local community residents over time? What are the potential advantages and disadvantages of such a strategy?

A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE is produced and directed by Roger Weisberg and Murray Nossel for Public Policy Productions. Weisberg's 20 previous PBS documentaries have won over 70 awards including Emmy, Peabody, and duPont-Columbia awards. His 1993 documentary, ROAD SCHOLAR, and his recent Academy Award nominated documentary, SOUND AND FURY, were distributed theatrically before airing on PBS. Murray Nossel is a clinical psychologist, ethnographer, and social worker. Nossel is on the teaching faculty at Columbia University School of Social Work and recently completed his doctoral dissertation about the anthropological implications of time in social work practice at The Center for Family Life. The film was presented by Thirteen WNET New York.

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