



Risa Bejarano: Trying to make sense of a senseless tragedy

On Sunday, June 6, 2004 the world woke up to learn that Ronald Reagan had died. For weeks it was as if there was no other news as world leaders, the media, and millions of ordinary people paid tribute to Reagan's life and legacy. But, on that same Sunday, June 6, there was another death – also in Los Angeles. But unlike the coverage of President Reagan's death, it was not mentioned by any news source. There was no press release, no funeral, no memorial, not even a word beyond a police report taken at the crime scene which indicated that on Sunday, June 6, police in the South Central area of Los Angeles found a young woman shot nine times in an alley. The initial ID of this petite co-ed wearing a sweatshirt from the University of California at Santa Barbara came up only as Jane Doe. If it hadn't been for a strange twist of fate that two years earlier this young woman became the subject of a documentary, this Jane Doe, whose real name was Risa Bejarano, would have died as if she had never lived at all.

When we first met Risa, we knew very little about her family background, and we knew nothing about the tremendous pull that her troubled past continued to exert over her life. What we knew was that Risa was living in her tenth foster home in ten years and was about to be discharged from the foster care system at the age of 18. It was Risa's transition from foster care to independent living, captured over the course of a year, which was the focus of our documentary, "Aging Out". Like everyone who met Risa, we were struck by her outgoing personality, easy smile, and optimistic outlook on life. She was an obvious favorite of her foster mother, Dolores Ruiz, who took great pride in Risa's many accomplishments. As an honors student, she was on the verge of becoming the first person in her family to graduate from high school. After years of hard work and sacrifice, she was about to realize her dream of enrolling in the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Of the dozens of young people preparing to leave foster care that we interviewed for this film, we would have voted Risa "most likely to succeed," hands down. Our cameras were there as she attended her senior prom with

the class valedictorian, received several scholarships, and graduated with high honors. Despite her reputation for being a bit bookish, she was enormously well liked by all her classmates. Although she was barely five feet, her outgoing personality, keen sense of ambition, and boundless optimism made her stand tall. To any casual observer Risa appeared to be the embodiment of the all-American girl.

As our year of filming proceeded, we began to learn more about the skeletons in Risa's closet. We discovered that she didn't know how many siblings she had but suspected there were at least a dozen. The ones that Risa knew were involved in drugs, gangs, and petty crime, and none made it past the tenth grade. Risa's mother supported her own drug habit by prostitution, and her home often became the neighborhood drug-dealing hub. In her family, Risa was the classic "parentified child" – she cooked, cleaned, and looked after her siblings. Instead of gravitating to life on the street with her older siblings, Risa retreated to her books and studies, becoming a nerd in the eyes of some of her siblings and a model student in the eyes of her teachers. One of the saddest revelations about Risa's childhood came during a cathartic interview we conducted about six months after we began chronicling her year of emancipation. Risa tearfully disclosed that she was repeatedly sexually molested from the age of five until she was placed in foster care at the age of nine. She also revealed that she was abused and neglected in many of her early foster care placements.

Risa explained that she decided to disclose the horrifying treatment she suffered as a child in part to relieve the burden that these memories continued to impose and in part to help others who suffered similar trauma. She had a genuine urge to help others realize that they don't need to be exclusively defined by poverty or by the abuse and neglect they may have experienced as children – that they could still take control of their lives and become successful adults. To us as filmmakers, Risa's resiliency and altruism were nothing short of amazing. Instead of making us feel sorry for her, which she would have loathed, her history of abuse and molestation made us even more impressed with her achievements and future prospects. If she could overcome such horrors at such a young age, it seemed like nothing could stop her from achieving her goal of graduating from college and becoming a social worker in order to help others who had "grown up in the system."

We took at face value her optimistic rhetoric about empowerment and achievement, and we grossly underestimated the pain that still persisted from such a difficult childhood. Despite Risa's impressive game face, we slowly began to discern some of the signs that her troubled past could not be so easily dismissed or overcome. Shortly before leaving for college, Risa

began to experiment with drugs, including marijuana, crack, cocaine, LSD, mushrooms, and crystal methamphetamine. We learned that Risa became addicted to crystal methamphetamine during her senior year of high school. She used the drug as a stimulant to stay awake while she worked the overnight shift at a fast food restaurant to earn money to help pay for college. When Risa went off to UC Santa Barbara, the urge to use these drugs became even greater. Because she grew up around drug dealers and knew how and where to buy drugs, she made frequent trips to L.A. to buy drugs for her classmates.

Risa wanted more than anything else to be able to juggle her two worlds – the world of the street and the world of an earnest college student. She wanted to prove to her sisters that she could walk the walk and talk the talk of the streets, but she also wanted to prove to them that she could become a success. As Risa's independence grew, she began to spend more time with her siblings, particularly her older sister, Alejandra. Balancing her two worlds became increasingly precarious during Risa's freshman year of college.

Unlike her classmates, Risa had no parents to return to on school holidays. Her former foster mother, Dolores, provided Risa with a home during Thanksgiving and Christmas vacations even though she had no spare bedroom and would receive no compensation for looking after Risa. Despite Dolores's generosity and Risa's affectionate feelings about her, Risa felt that returning to her foster home was a step backward and that she needed to establish a more independent life for herself.

On Mother's Day weekend, 2003, Risa went back to L.A. to find her mother and reconnect with other siblings. We never fully learned what happened in L.A. on Mother's Day. Even Risa has trouble recalling the events of that weekend, but when she returned to college, it was clear that she was not the same girl she was when she left. Her doctors say that Risa had a psychotic break and was suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. After several weeks in the psychiatric ward of a Santa Barbara hospital, Risa had to drop out of UC Santa Barbara and move back to Dolores's house. Although Dolores had a house full of girls in foster care and received no financial support for Risa, she made room for Risa in her own bedroom. With the help of anti-depressant medication and loving care from Dolores, Risa made an impressive recovery, although she couldn't fully conceal the side effects of the drugs nor the emotional turmoil that lingered long after her breakdown.

Risa regarded her psychotic break as just another setback, one more obstacle in her path that she had to overcome. She quickly got a job packing groceries at a local supermarket; won a new \$5,000 scholarship to help with living expenses while attending college; enrolled in a local community

college; bought her first car; and moved into a nearby independent living program.

As Risa became more independent, she continued to straddle her two seemingly irreconcilable worlds. Though she was once again working and going to school, it wasn't long before she started abusing drugs again, particularly crystal methamphetamine. As she continued to battle drug addiction, staying in school and holding a job became more difficult. She bounced around from an independent living program, to her sister's house, to her former foster mother's house.

Then in early June 2004, Risa found herself with no place to live and on June 5 was discovered shot and killed in an alley in the South Gate section of L.A. Her body remained unclaimed at the city morgue for over three weeks. The city of Los Angeles was about to have her cremated and buried in a public grave, but with help from Risa's sister, Alejandra, and the funders of the film, we ultimately were able to arrange a private funeral for Risa's family and friends.

What is so tragic about Risa's death is that she had come from such a dark place, had overcome so much adversity, and had such promise. Risa was unlike most young people who age out of foster care with no support; she received many services. She received mental health counseling, several scholarships and living stipends, and subsidized housing benefits from an independent living program. Despite this unusual array of supports, it's impossible not to wonder how her senseless death could have been avoided.

Risa was a person who thrived when she was in a secure and nurturing environment and fell apart when she didn't have a safe place to call home. While Risa consciously straddled her two worlds, she ultimately gravitated toward the street life of her siblings over the sheltered life of a college student. Despite the range of services she received, the very system that removed Risa from her abusive home ultimately failed to protect her. We can't help thinking that Risa might be alive today if, instead of being discharged from foster care at the age of 18, she continued to remain in the custody of her foster mother until she graduated from college. She would have had a safe home to return during college vacations and would have been surrounded by someone who genuinely cared about her. This kind of support might have enabled her to avoid the pull of the street.

Ironically, a few days after Risa was shot, she was scheduled to join us on a trip to New Mexico where we planned to show the film to the National Governors Association. We hoped the film would lead to discussions about how policy makers could help young people like Risa make more successful

transitions from foster care to independent living. If Risa had lived to participate in those discussions, her plan was to tell the governors that it's important to offer "independent living services" in the communities where foster youth grow up and often return once their case is closed, and that it's equally important to involve biological family members in service planning and delivery.

Too often young people are removed from their families and neighborhoods and placed in settings where contact with parents and siblings is all but impossible. Risa, like most young people in foster care, felt a powerful bond with her family that could not be broken despite the abuse and neglect she suffered. Among all of the young people leaving foster care that we interviewed, the urge to reconnect with her family members seemed to intensify as the day of "emancipation" approached. That's why it makes all the sense in the world to support this instinctive bond wherever possible and to offer services not just to foster youth but also to their family members who often need just as much help and support. Ultimately, Risa had two goals – to be close to her family and to prove to them that she could succeed. Risa would have told the governors in New Mexico that their challenge was to make sure that those goals are not mutually exclusive for teenagers aging out of foster care.

Risa's untimely death demonstrates that even young people who outwardly appear to be successful and stable are at risk. The 20,000 teenagers like Risa who age out of foster care every year need a great deal of help to cope with the scars of early childhood trauma that never fully heal, and they also need a safe home and the support of a caring adult to help them navigate the thorny transition from adolescence to adulthood. Although it's impossible to make sense of Risa's violent death, we hope that her tragic story can prevent other foster youth from sharing a similar fate.

**-- Roger Weisberg, Public Policy Productions
Writer, producer and director of AGING OUT**