



Joe and Harry Gantz

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE AND HARRY GANTZ

Our American Winter

Filmmakers Joe and Harry Gantz talk about their experience documenting Portland's poverty

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

The Great Recession began nearly five years ago. Since then, economists and the media have produced a string of graphs, as well as employment and financial data that show that the economy has made a sluggish, yet, clear march toward recovery. But what is often absent from this tepidly optimistic picture are all the people who weren't lifted up by the recovery, who never quite saw the recession end and never stopped worrying.

Harry and Joe Gantz, two Emmy Award-winning filmmakers best known for capturing life in action in the documentary series "Taxicab Confessions" and the documentary film "Sex with Strangers" as well as others, present an intimate portrait of eight Portland families left behind by the recovery in "American Winter." The film, which played during the Portland International Film Festival and premieres March 18 on HBO, captures candid moments in the lives of families who seem to live in a state of perpetual dread as they drift from crisis to crisis, worrying about how to keep the electricity on, how to pay for housing and the toll their new-found poverty is taking on their kids.

The Gantz brothers selected Portland for the film's setting, where they used 211Info, a hotline that refers people in need to social services, to find the families whose lives they document in revealing detail. Portland caught their eye because, unlike Los Angeles or New York, it wasn't the obvious place to tap into hard times. Nonetheless, it provided a bounty of stories of a lost American dream.

Jake Thomas: Why did you select the title "American Winter?"

Joe Gantz: Well, you'll remember that the Arab Spring was a time of unlimited potential, a time of awakening and change in a positive direction. It kind of occurred to us that at this time of need, when so many families were losing homes and losing jobs and tremendously in need of some form of assistance, we, as a country, were focusing on cutting budgets and cutting services and not looking at the human side of the equation. So it felt like the potential of this country was being lost a little. We felt like this is an American Winter that will hopefully be followed by an American Spring.

Harry Gantz: The point is that we want people to see a little of themselves in there. Everybody knows someone who lost a job. Everybody knows someone who was foreclosed on or is at threat of being foreclosed on. So this is a unique time with large new populations of poor. The formerly middle class have fallen into poverty, and it's happening at the same time previous cuts to social services will just make it a perfect storm. These social workers you see in the film are having to do so much more with so much less.

J.T.: Did anything surprise you? Was there anything that was unexpected?

Joe: I think the thing that struck me first and most powerfully was to watch families who were dealing with this kind of stress on a daily basis, on an hourly basis, that goes with not having enough to meet the needs of your family, to be continually worried about losing your electricity or your heat or the lease on your house, of being evicted or not having enough food. Being a parent in the worst-case scenario, you don't want to transmit that sense of panic and dread to

your kid, but, on the other hand, you don't want to lie to them completely. And these parents are just so overwhelmed by this. It's not a way to live. It's traumatizing to the entire family.

I personally think that having watched that in making this film and lived so close to them as they were going through it that it has long-term effects on families and on kids. Kids who go through this in the U.S. will not do well in school, they will not be able to fulfill their potential or will often be traumatized to the point where they don't finish high school or don't finish college and don't become the members of society that we expect and hope for, but they'll be so traumatized that they become a burden on society.

J.T.: Where would you say our social safety net is most vulnerable, if anywhere?

Joe: That's a tough question. I'd like to come at it slightly differently. A lot of people that we worked with spoke about how it's so hard to get help and you have to go through so many hoops. You have to call into 211 at the right time at the month for some services. And then if you do get a job and make a little

"I see a 40-year movement in the media starting with the Reagan administration to demonize people who receive social services, with the welfare queen and the 47 percent, and we found the opposite to be true. Sure, there's some fraud in the system, but the majority of people there are because of some unforeseen circumstances. They want to work. They want to support their family. They want the dignity of a job."

— HARRY GANTZ
CO-DIRECTOR, AMERICAN WINTER

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"American Winter", filmed in Portland, makes its television debut March 18 on HBO.