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more money, they take away your housing assistance or food stamps so you're put back to the point where you are stuck at the very edge. The goal should be to get people on their feet and live a life that's comfortable. And I don't mean cushy. I mean you don't spend every minute of every day on how you're going to keep your head above water.

Harry: A lot of people are frustrated with social services, but put yourself in their position where they got into this to help people and you have more people needing your help, and there are cuts to resources for people needing your help and there are fewer resources.

Joe: Commissioner Nick Fish said in the film that it's cheaper by far to help people before they completely fall through the safety net and become homeless. Our experience has been that the vast majority of people we talked to and followed in Portland was that they worked their entire life, they wanted nothing more than to get off of social services as fast as they could and they just wanted a means to support their family and the amount of support they got was not enough. If they did get a job that kind of got them ahead a little bit, but they were faced with a corresponding cut to their housing help of food stamps.

J.T.: After making this documentary do you think America is a fair place?

Joe: [Pause] Fair place meaning everyone has a shot to succeed?

Above, one of the families from "American Winter." T.J., (center) with his son and Kristian. At right, people stand in line for food assistance in another scene from the documentary, filmed in Portland.

PHOTOS BY DEVON TERRILL/ COURTESY HBO

J.T.: Sure.

Joe: No, I don't really think so. The statistics in this film that show that poverty is growing and the predictor if you'll get ahead in this country and succeed is most often determined by the wealth of your family. There are all kinds of reasons when we ask people who were struggling if they felt they had a shot at the American dream. Most of the kids as well as the adults said they really didn't feel like that was their reality.

J.T.: You got some great material for this documentary, some really candid moments. I was wondering how you found these families and developed a rapport with them.

Joe: That is our speciality, capturing life in progress, and we just spent a lot of time. You try to establish a rapport and you fade into the background and let their life go on as if you're not there. We never tried to influence that in any way, and when we're filming these things we try to be a fly on the wall as much as we can, and, in time, people warm up, and they go back to being themselves.

There's a lot of shame in being poor and needing social services, so we were asking them to open up completely for us.

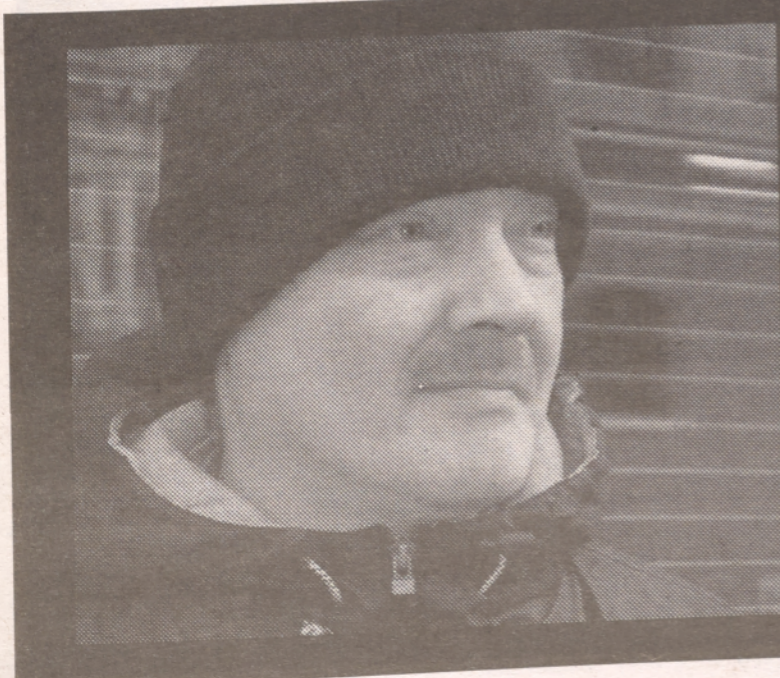


Harry: The kids even spoke to the shame by not telling their friends where they live. I see a 40-year movement in the media starting with the Reagan administration to demonize people who receive social services, with the welfare queen and the 47 percent and we found the opposite to be true. Sure, there's 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. The stereotype is very different, and you can find that, but after listening in on thousands of phone calls and visiting with hundreds of families you find that's not the case.

J.T.: Are there any moments in making the film that haunt you or resonate with you?

Joe: There were a lot of moments. It's extremely hard to be with folks who are going through very difficult times, including not having enough to eat. You're with a film crew and you know when you break you're going to go with the crew and get a meal, and you're going to go back in a comfortable environment, and they are in danger of losing their electricity. It was difficult to be part of the film in that respect.

We made a trailer of the film, and in the trailer we paid the people at the end of the day. We paid them what we considered not a lot of money ... But what we didn't realize is that they were so desperate that the amount of money we were giving them was changing their situation totally. So when we decided we were done shooting then we paid them. It was just very hard.



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