

Viewing Homelessness through a Lens

Documentaries Capture a Reality Words Cannot Explain

by Stephanie Harz

Three newly released documentaries examine the lives of homeless families and youth. They are a reflection of the times, highlighting the increase in the number of homeless families throughout the United States. In the 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR), the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development indicates that the number of families in shelter has increased by 77 percent, from 131,000 families in 2007 to 170,000 in 2009.

Unfortunately, this increase comes at a time when resources and funds for homeless services are decreasing, leaving the homeless with little, if any, assistance. Of the 29 cities included in the 2009 Hunger and Homeless Survey conducted by the United States Conference of Mayors, 22 cities, or 82 percent of respondents, reported having

to make adjustments to accommodate an increase in the demand for shelter, and 14 cities, or 52 percent of respondents, reported they had to turn away homeless individuals and families because of lack of available shelter beds. But the numbers are not sufficient in telling the story. An escalating number of families are sleeping in churches, motels, and in friends' homes.

Familiar Stories Become Startling Truths

The New Mexico-based documentary, *Looking In: Kids Who Are Homeless*, directed and produced by Christopher Schueler, exposes the usually secret lives of homeless youth. The movie explores the lives of six homeless teens as they share their disappointing past, uncertain present, and hopeful future.

The issue of youth homelessness is also investigated in the documentary *The Hidden Homeless*, directed by Dean Thomas and produced by Eileen Littig of the Education Television Productions of Northeastern Wisconsin (ETP-NEW). Viewers meet homeless youth from Green Bay and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Manistique and Escanaba, Michigan, where the teens show how they survived day-after-day without anyone knowing they were homeless.

Shifting the focus from homeless youth to homeless women and families, *On the Edge* follows seven women who struggle to stay off the streets. Situated in suburban towns, rural areas, and resort communities throughout



A video still from *Looking In: Kids Who Are Homeless*. Rachel Kindell, a formerly homeless youth at the University of New Mexico where she is currently enrolled in her sophomore year.

the country, these women deal with abuse, drugs, and natural disasters. They each tell their unique stories that ultimately lead them to the same place: life without a home.

For Diane Nilan, producer of *On the Edge* and president and founder of HEAR US Inc., it was obvious that a video documentary was the next step in increasing awareness of this growing problem. “We are a very visual society,” Nilan says, “I wanted the women to tell their story on their own; to give them their voice and visibility, which is the cornerstone of HEAR US.”

An organization that advocates for systemic change for homeless families and youth, HEAR US believes this increasing population has been ignored for far too long. Nilan says, “When done well, a documentary can be very successful at advocating for an issue. By the women telling their own stories, rather than someone else telling them, a stronger message comes across.”

Angela from Opelousas, Louisiana, explains in *On the Edge* how she lived in a trailer with her seven children for four months without utilities. The Department of Children and Family Services threatened to take her children and place them in foster care if the utilities were not turned on within one week. Desperate to keep her children, Angela went to a family homeless shelter. Now, three years later, she is a director at the homeless shelter where she and her children stayed.

Melissa, another woman featured in *On the Edge*, lived in Milton, Florida, when her daughter became very sick, causing Melissa to miss work and ultimately be fired from her job. Unable to pay her bills, she was evicted and she and her children spent the next three years living in multiple hotels and in friends’ homes. When Melissa finally was able to afford a home, she and her family only lived there for six months before a hurricane destroyed their apartment.

Schueler agrees with Nilan’s view of documentaries as a tool to promote awareness and advocacy. Schueler states, “Through honesty, we can tell a story in a way that helps social agencies and groups make change in a responsible way.”



Angela shares a story with the filmmakers of *On the Edge* at the New Life Center, the shelter where she and her family stayed when she was homeless and where she has recently been promoted to director.

He makes it clear in *Looking In* that the rise in the number of homeless youth is a severe problem in New Mexico. In the 2008–09 school year, New Mexico had 8,380 homeless youth enrolled in public schools, an increase of 91 percent since the 2006–07 school year when there were 4,383 homeless youth.

Looking In was designed as a comprehensive media campaign to help parents, educators, and communities in New Mexico understand why homelessness occurs and to address how it relates to education. The documentary shows how school is often the only consistency in homeless teens’ lives. They do not sleep in the same place for a long period of time and often live by themselves, leaving them lonely and without adult guidance. School provides homeless youth with a stable place to come to day after day, where they are indoors and looked after by adults. Despite this connection to school, homeless teens often do not inform their teachers or school administrators of their living situation, making it much harder for schools to identify homeless students and provide them with the services to which they are entitled.

Tyler Booher, one of the teens featured in *Looking In*, found his mother, Janet, lying on the floor badly beaten by her husband. Janet filed a restraining order against her husband and she and Tyler moved out of their home. With nowhere to turn, they started sleeping next to a dumpster behind a McDonald’s. At only 15 years old, Tyler begged

for spare change or for something to eat on the street. Another teen in the documentary, Miranda, was 16 years old when she and her father were evicted. Her classmates made fun of her for wearing the same clothes every day.

The high schools in Green Bay, Wisconsin, like those in New Mexico, are also experiencing a drastic increase in homeless youth. As of November 2010, there were 800 homeless high school students in the Green Bay area. This is more than double the 325 homeless high school students that were enrolled in 2004. *The Hidden Homeless* shows these youth looking much like their non-homeless peers, yet living on their own and sleeping wherever they can find shelter, including an abandoned bus and a tent on a deserted island.

Scott, an unaccompanied youth featured in *The Hidden Homeless*, left his abusive home when he was 18 years old and went to a small island on Menominee River, where the states of Wisconsin and Michigan meet. Scott describes the island as the only local, semi-livable place where he could live without being seen by anyone in the community. He stayed on the island for a little over a week, until he knew he would freeze, relocating then to a laundromat.

Unlike *Looking In*, where some homeless youth live with their parent(s), *The Hidden Homeless* features only unaccompanied youth, homeless youth who are not in physical custody of their legal guardian and, according to the National Center for Homeless Education, have often left home because of family conflict, where they are forced to leave home by their parents or choose to leave because they feel unsafe or unwilling to continue living with their parents. In addition, *Looking In* is geared primarily toward

an audience of educators, policy makers, and those who work with homeless youth. The documentary aims to alleviate youth homelessness in New Mexico, noting solutions and supports to assist homeless youth. In contrast, *The Hidden Homeless* is geared toward a general audience and is less about solutions to youth homelessness and more about providing insight into what takes place in the lives of homeless teens.

What It Takes to Tell a Story

Wisconsin Public Television aired *The Hidden Homeless*, and in November 2010 the film won the “Outstanding Media Presentation Award” by the National Association of the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. However, the process for creating this influential documentary was neither simple nor short. The filming did not begin until the teen cast members trusted and felt comfortable with Thomas and his crew. “We did not do any filming during the first six months,” explains Thomas. “It took a long time to build trust with the kids and their social workers. It is very difficult to build the trust. If you don’t build the trust you get yes and no answers.”

This slow process of building trust is not unique to Thomas and his crew. Schueler went through a similar process when creating *Looking In*. “We don’t bring huge lights; that’s intimidating. We try to keep [the teens] in an element where they are comfortable and they feel safe,” Schueler explains.

Schueler’s efforts were apparent in the end product. *Looking In* has been distributed to every parent-teacher association, superintendent, and health teacher in the state of New Mexico, and the documentary has been aired on various television channels throughout New Mexico.

Rachel Kindell, a teen featured in *Looking In*, is now a sophomore at the University of New Mexico. The film begins with her explaining she was raped by two men when she was 14 years old. She attempted to commit suicide soon after. Her mother’s boyfriend said she was lying about being raped and acting out for attention and kicked her out of the house when she was 15 years old. All she had was her car and a few belongings. Kindell lived in her car

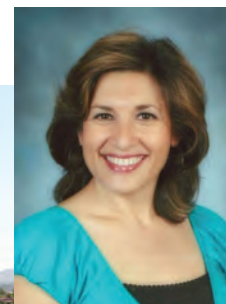


A picture taken while filming *On the Edge*. The women in the documentary were interviewed in a variety of settings, including their work places, homes, and previous shelter placements.

or slept on friends' couches until her senior year of high school when she was able to pay rent to live in a house.

Creating the documentary did not make Kindell uneasy, but seeing it was a different experience. "It was a little more difficult to watch it than it was to be a part of it. When you talk about it, it's different from hearing it," she explains.

Julianna Martinez, from Phoenix, Arizona, had different feelings when being interviewed for *On the Edge*. A mother of four and formerly homeless because of spousal abuse, Martinez was surprised by the issues she shared with others. "I was very nervous at first. As we started to go it just came out." She continues, "When Diane interviewed me the first time I was homeless, I was coming to terms with what I was going through. We both found out more than we thought we [would]."



Personal snapshots provided by Juliana Martinez, a formerly homeless mother featured in *On the Edge*. From left

to right: Juliana with former United States President George H. W. Bush while she was serving in the U.S. military, Juliana with her four children who were 7, 9, 11, and 13 years old when they became homeless, Juliana enjoying a hike in Arizona, and a recent portrait.

In *On the Edge*, Martinez explains how being the victim of domestic violence left her feeling physically and emotionally trapped in her home, unable to leave her husband and support herself and her children. Her husband made her feel so insignificant for such a long period of time; she did not believe she had the ability or courage to leave. Both Martinez and her ex-husband were in the military when the abuse began. Martinez remembers how apprehensive she was to tell anyone about what was taking place because she knew her husband would lose his military rank, which would cause his salary to decrease making them unable to afford their home and provide for their children.

She was raised to believe that children need both a mother and a father. "I thought I was protecting my children by staying, but my kids knew what was happening," she says.

It was not until her husband became violent with her eldest son that she made the decision to leave.

Wanting Others to Know

Martinez speaks publicly about being homeless because she believes "kids don't deserve that life." The local family shelters would not accommodate Martinez's teen children. In order to keep the family together they stayed in their friends' homes. "After we left the house the kids just stayed in school. They went to camps in school," says Martinez. "At one point we had to all stay with different friends. We had a rally point on the football field. Whatever your situation is, you can come out of it. Ask for help." Now with two of her children in college on basketball scholarships, Martinez wants other people to know what she did not: there are resources and people that can help homeless families.

Kindell also has a personal message that she hopes she got across in *Looking In*. "When I got kicked out [of my house]. I fell on a wrong path: gangs and drugs. I just kind of looked at myself one day and thought I could go down the hard road and figure things out, or I could die getting shot or overdosing," explains Kindell. "A year and a half later I got a scholarship and went to a conference in D.C. and spoke about my story. This was two years ago, and then what I said began getting published in the newspapers and people found out what was going on. I went to West Mesa High School; they called me their homeless student. At first it kind of bothered me, but after a while I was kind of proud of it. It kind of defines me."

Kindell is open to discussing her homeless years, because she wants teens who are currently homeless to know they are not alone. In describing homeless teens she says, “They experience fear. They need help but they are afraid to ask.”

Homeless to inform people in Wisconsin and Michigan of the recent increase in unaccompanied youth. He believes once people are informed of the issue, they will take the action they deem most appropriate.



Scott left his home in Chicago, Illinois, to escape gang involvement. Having no connections in Escanaba, Michigan, Scott, and another youth from Chicago, slept in an abandoned school bus located in the woods.

Stories with a Purpose

These three documentarians do not consider their work a success unless it informs their viewers of the issue at hand and encourages a reaction. “We are looking for any response we can get,” Thomas explains of his documentary, *The Hidden Homeless*. “When people are aware of the problem, they start thinking about it. We all know spending is shrinking and shrinking and things are getting cut,” he adds, “Whether they take an active role or passive in their vote, they can help.” Thomas wants *The Hidden*

Schueler had more specific goals when he began creating *Looking In*. “We created four think tanks to determine how the documentary can best address the problem and a solution. We included government officials, public education teachers and administrators, public health advocates, non-governmental agencies who work with the homeless, doctors, homeless people, and others involved with homeless youth,” explains Schueler. The think tank meetings and other forms of research were conducted for a year before the filming began.

Looking In advocates for an increased amount of affordable, safe housing in New Mexico. “We strategically placed the Supportive Housing Coalition at the end of the documentary. Throughout it we wanted to grab people by the heart with the kids, explain the issue. Then see what is possible at the end, give specific solutions,” says Schueler. In addition to promoting additional affordable housing, he states, “The goal in New Mexico is to end homelessness, certainly child homelessness, and I think we can do it.”

Kindell says, in *Looking In*, that the hardest part of being a homeless teen “was knowing that nobody was there that I could talk to. Sometimes I got these feelings like I just wanted to break down and cry, and who did I have to turn to, nobody. That was probably the worst part of it all, not being able to share something with anybody.” Kindell’s story and the stories of others featured in these documentaries make homelessness personal, taking on the face of the teenager, mother, or family next door, and creating a powerful tool for change. Unclear or misguided ideas about homelessness become stark realities in these films, making teen and family homelessness an issue impossible to ignore. ■