

From Documentary To Book: The Making of Growing Up Fast
By Joanna Lipper

It was Carol Gilligan who first invited me to come to Pittsfield to videotape the workshops she taught with Normi Noel at The Teen Parent Program, which was twenty minutes away from her home in West Stockbridge. Our relationship dated back to the Boston Festival of Women's Cinema where in 1998, she had moderated a discussion following the screening of a documentary film I had produced and directed entitled, "Inside Out: Portraits of Children." The screening was a benefit for the Guidance Center of Cambridge, a multicultural agency that addresses the developmental needs of families through prevention, intervention, education, and support programs.

Carol was deeply moved by my film about the imaginary worlds of children. She encouraged me to consider making a documentary film about teen motherhood. When she received a grant from the Klingenstein Foundation, she offered to allocate some of the money toward the making of the documentary.

Carol and Normi's workshop convened an hour a week over a six-week period from May through the beginning of June. During the first session I attended, Carol showed the teen mothers a section of my previous film, which was narrated exclusively by its subjects, children between the ages of five and twelve. After the screening, I asked the teen mothers how they would feel about being in a documentary and explained what this endeavor would entail. Among the prerequisites was the courage to be seen and heard. Each participant had to believe that what she had to say was valuable and important. She had to be driven to shatter what up until then had been her own private silence.

A few members of the group were interested and felt strong enough to attempt this. Those who were game tested the waters and allowed me to interview them. Those who felt comfortable being videotaped identified themselves potential subjects. Aware of the level of intimacy, involvement, scrutiny, and commitment that the project required, they agreed to let me into their worlds.

My impression was that the young mothers who volunteered to be in the documentary shared a deep desire to rebel against the negative stereotypes that were heaped upon them solely on the basis of their identity as teen mothers. They saw the project as a way of actively participating in the creation of their own portraits. The alternative, as they saw it, was to passively resign themselves to accepting other people's narrow, prejudiced views as the truth about who they were.

Accustomed to being criticized and neglected, these teen mothers the validation of their thoughts and feelings, acknowledgement of their work in their multiple roles as parents, students, and low-wage employees. They wanted their views to be heard; they wanted respect; and they wanted their lives and their children's needs to be taken seriously.

In their book *The Social Health of The Nation: How America is Really Doing*, Marc and Marque-Luisa Miringoff make the point that, "In a democracy, problems generally are not addressed until they are recognized and understood by the public. Yet many social conditions have worsened for generations without significant public knowledge.... The conditions that define us are not only a series of individual achievements or failures, but also the products of social dynamics that can be recognized discussed and addressed."

Participating in the documentary and later in the book gave the teen parents hope that their plight might become better understood. Perhaps their children, and the millions of children like them across the country, might then, in turn, receive more support, better education and greater opportunities.

The human desire for recognition is one of the main draws of the contemporary reality shows that have become network and cable staples, displacing comedies and dramas from their coveted

primetime slots. The teen parents had grown up watching shows like *The Real World*; the idea of being videotaped and allowing their daily lives to become accessible to the public was not alien to them.

Aside from the first two days of interviews when I had a cinematographer assist me, I operated the video camera myself over a period of four years. This was a visceral, intense experience, as I was absorbing words, emotions, facial expressions, and movement in real time. I used a hand-held, Sony VX-1000 mini-DV camera, relied on natural light, and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. I attended children's birthday parties, the senior prom, graduation, family barbecues and other special events. I interviewed the teen mothers, their parents, and the fathers of their babies. We also spent a substantial amount of time relaxing, hanging out—talking when the camera wasn't running.

Recognizing that their lives were incredibly stressful and busy, I made myself available to meet with them on their terms: at home, at work, at school, and at social gatherings. We caught up with each other during their fifteen-minute lunch breaks, between classes, late at night after their kids were fast asleep, and on weekends when they were lucky enough to have a half-day off from work.

Occasionally the teenagers would lose track of time, forgetting to cancel scheduled meetings when they were overwhelmed with errands or doctor's appointments, or when they had to work unexpectedly, or if transportation got tricky. I would wait for them in my car, often for hours, parked on street corners or in the parking lots of housing projects, staring out my window watching children playing, snowflakes falling, leaves burning, and people coming and going.

Ultimately, this patience and unwavering dedication constituted the foundation upon which our relationships were built. As the teen mothers witnessed my respect and commitment, I was rewarded with their trust and raw honesty.

Not too far removed from the ups and downs of my own adolescence, I empathized with their fluctuating moods and their many conflicting obligations. I was sensitive to the high levels of stress that saturated their daily lives. We shared good days, bad days, and many very ordinary days. I witnessed private and public moments. As they introduced me to the fathers of their babies and to their parents, I began to get a sense of their romantic relationships, their friend and family histories. What had been a blank canvas began to take on color, shape, and dimension as I learned more and more about the different layers of their lives.

In late fall of 1999, the thirty-minute documentary film premiered at *HBO's Frame by Frame Film Festival* at *The Screening Room* in New York City. Several of the teen mothers came in for the event. After the film they answered questions from the audience, reassured by the warm, empathic response to their stories. Later, when the film screened at the Harvard Graduate School of Education as part of *The Askwith Lecture Series*, the teen mothers participated in another panel discussion. Some audience members were critical of the teenagers' choice to give birth and keep their babies. The teen mothers fielded both positive and negative responses to their personal stories. A few months later, Amy's mother, Donna, drove several of the teen mothers to New York for a screening at Makor, a division of the 92nd Street Y. The event was co-sponsored by The Woodhull Institute for Women and Ethical Leadership and Ms. Magazine. Carol Gilligan, Naomi Wolf and I joined the teen mothers for a post-screening discussion.

Participating in these discussions and witnessing the effect the documentary film had on audiences influenced the teen mothers. It made them realize how powerful their voices could be. They saw how intrigued people were by their lives and the issues they faced. It was then that the teenagers realized that they had the power to teach people, to make a strong impact through the act of telling their stories.

The documentary covered the teenagers' lives through their last months of high school. After it was completed, we mutually agreed to continue videotaping interviews with the objective of

creating a book. Often books are turned into films; it is more rare for a film to inspire a book. The teen parents and I realized that there was so much more to explore—the short documentary was only the tip of the iceberg.

I embarked upon this project without any agenda other than curiosity about the lives of teen mothers, which at the outset, I knew very little about. My subsequent research was motivated and spurred on by the content of the oral histories I collected. The interviews with the teenagers and their families left me with many questions. A voracious reader, I began my search for answers in books, and gradually expanded the scope of my interviews to include people in the community like Captain Barry, Mayor Hathaway, Nicole, Katrina, Joann, Mary and Dr. Felitti. My extensive research spanned a variety of disciplines including economics, anthropology, sociology, industrial history, medicine, literature, psychology, politics, and environmental science. My reading helped me to situate the stories of these individuals and the story of Pittsfield's relationship to General Electric within a much larger national context. The scope, breadth, and detail of the teenagers' lives from infancy through adulthood, the history of Pittsfield's evolution from a thriving industrial center to an economically depressed community suffering from the loss of its manufacturing base, and the addition of new subjects proved to be far beyond what I could adequately capture in one documentary film. Thus, I shifted my focus and devoted my energy to compiling an archive of visual and oral histories. Interviews from this archive eventually became the spine of the book.

Throughout the writing process, I continued to photograph and videotape the teen parents as they went through their routines, visiting them at home, at work, at their parents' homes, and in the case of Jessica, at Berkshire Community College. In addition to the videotaped material, some interviews were audiotaped, conducted over the telephone or in person. All of the interviews were transcribed and edited, with an emphasis on maintaining the integrity of each voice and extracting the most vivid story from hours of material. I watched and listened closely as the teenagers matured, strengthening their sense of autonomy and leaving adolescence behind, just as their children began speaking in full sentences and started school.

The final step of the writing process involved synthesizing the interviews with my research and deciding how to present the girls' stories in the most compelling, accessible way. Preserving the authenticity of the subjects' voices was my first priority. Ultimately, I chose to tell their stories in the third person, maintaining the vernacular whenever the subjects spoke within the text. Following the advice of my editor, Frances Coady, I crafted the narrative so that most of the core concepts were woven in beneath the surface, so that readers could discover them through the prism of individual human stories. It is gratifying when readers tell me that the book reads like a novel. That was my goal.

During the years which I dedicated to this project, one of the books that galvanized me each day was Dorothy's Allison's courageous, gripping memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*:

“Behind the story I tell is the one I don't. Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear. Behind my carefully buttoned collar is my nakedness, the struggle to find clean clothes, food, meaning and money. Behind sex is rage, behind anger is love, behind this moment is silence, years of silence.”

“Two or three things I know for sure, and one is that I would rather go naked than wear the clothes the world has made for me.”