Interview with Tod Lending

Tod Lending had heard about Terrell Collins, a bright kid who was beating the odds in the toughest housing projects in Chicago. Terrell sounded perfect for a series he produced for PBS, *No Time to Be a Child*. He had just finished an interview with Terrell s grandmother and was waiting to interview Terrell when the news came: someone had gunned down and killed the 14-year-old on his way home from school.

That was the beginning of a five-year odyssey with the family, which resulted in *Legacy*. The 90-minute feature, which debuted at Sundance and is airing on HBO next spring, follows Terrell s drug-addicted mother Wanda; his aunt Alaissa, who was trapped in despair and living from one welfare check to the next; his matriarchal grandmother Dorothy; and his promising, sprightly cousin Nickcole.

Nickcole narrates the drama, which opens with wrenching scenes of Terrell s funeral. The family was beseiged with media, she recalls, but what the media never get to see is how that pain can change a family over time. The changes in the Collins family were simply astonishing, and astonishingly positive. The central characters, all haunted by Terrell s murder, struggle toward success and out of the stereotypes that they so easily represented on the news that terrible night.

Tod Lending talks with Center Director Pat Aufderheide about the challenges—technical, financial, moral—to the chronicle of one American family s saga.

What choices did you make in launching the movie?

It ll be on HBO in spring of 2001 [It was shown on Cinemax in 2001, and on HBO in 2002-PA]. HBO was originally going to put it on in 2000, but they thought there was a chance at an Academy nomination and they wanted to wait until after the Awards [*Legacy* was indeed nominated]. Some people believe you want to get it qualified for an Academy Award before it does a festival. Other people say let it build up good reviews and then submit it. It screened for seven days in November in Los Angeles, before Sundance. Sundance didn't consider the qualifying screening as a problem; Sundance considered itself the debut event. Since then it s been at Houston, where it won the Silver Medal; it screened at San Francisco International Film Festival and got a Golden Gate Award; it went to South by Southwest, to the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, Cleveland, St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia. It went to the Cinema du reel in Paris, to Thessaloniki in Greece, it s been invited to Edinburgh and Italy.

How have audience reactions differed?

Some things are always the same. The funeral scene tears everybody up, just like it did me when I was there, watching young kids sobbing and collapsing before Terrell s coffin. Many times I go to the screening with someone from the family, and then the Q&A afterward is so wonderful. It has made the film worth making to see people react in such a heartfelt way—whites, blacks, kids, older people, to see how this affects and touches people.

Going to Europe with it was quite interesting. The Cinema du Reel is very selective. They take only 20-25 films from all over the world. The French audience felt the music was too pushy, too emotional. At Sundance, by contrast, one of the first comments was how much people loved the music. In Paris, some people said it was too tightly structured, too clean. They would have liked the film to be longer. In the U.S., people have appreciated that the story moves along, that there

aren t verite scenes that go on aimlessly. Also the French were less comfortable with how close the camera was.

You got substantial foundation support, on the basis of the social issues that the story brings up.

Yes, the Collins family has every social issue imaginable in their story. It s very personal and at the same time a wonderful springboard for discussion. The foundation money came mostly in postproduction, though. The production went about four years without support, but I was piggyback shooting on the PBS project, which eventually aired as three one-offs, in 1995, 1996 and 1998. The key to raising more funds was the HBO license agreement. Then several foundations made major contributions for outreach: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Kellogg Foundation.

The outreach plan is immense and extensive. You ve got major partners like the United Way and the Boys and Girls Clubs using the film in their activities, you ve got elaborate materials and a deep website.

The website—legacymovie.com—is going to be a powerful tool, I think, to make the film useful to lots of different needs. If you re a grandparent raising a grandchild, if you re getting off welfare, if you re dealing with public housing. I wrote a journal that tells a lot of how the movie got made and what it was like to be doing it, and it s up there too.

You ve got outreach going on already, even before the film has been shown on HBO.

I don t see why outreach even has to be linked to a TV date. Judy Ravitz organized the outreach, and it s amazing what she s done. She brought on five strategic partnerships, large organizations that reach way out into the community. For instance, there s ITC, the Interdenominational Theological Center, with the largest collection of black churches in the world. That s an incredible partner to have. To have that community endorse the film was extreely important to me. They ve taken it in a reversioned form. I did a 35 minute cutdown of the film, a synopsis. It goes a long with the outreach package. If they want the full-length version they can order it. HBO has no problem with its going to community groups; the word of mouth can only help them.

How did you get into this kind of socially engaged filmmaking?

I began as a hired gun, a freelancer, and didn t consider myself a filmmaker but a technician. I began in editing, and first worked on *The Equalizer*, the Universal TV show about a former secret service agent who becomes a vigilante, and I learned how to pace for TV. Then I edited a low budget feature, went to LA, got out of editing and fell into the documentary world. I began as an AP and did research and writing, producing, and was working numerous jobs in reality based programming. I moved back to Chicago, my original home, in 1991, and worked one more freelance job with Harpo Studios, on an after school special on racism. I won a national Emmy for that. Then I decided it was time to do my own work.

Did you have models in other documentary work, veterans like Fred Wiseman or the Maysles, or the makers of *Hoop Dreams*?

Fred Wiseman does long films, but not longitudinal studies like this one. He comes to the subject as an outsider and stays the outsider. He has a recent film called *Public Housing*, and it couldn’t

be more different a feeling than in Legacy. I feel no connection to his subjects; he doesn t know them and doesn t want to know them. I come at it from the opposite angle, I want to have a relationship with my subject, and I want it to be as much about them and their lives as about my relationships to them. The closest model I can think of was Hoop Dreams, because of the subject matter and the length of time it took to make it. Stylistically, I wasn t interested in going that way, just because I try to respond to the material, rather than impose a style. In terms of the camera work I was very intimate with the family, and I felt it was appropriate to use a lot of closeups.

And a lot of slo-mos, too.

Well, there are some slo-mos, but fewer than people seem to remember. There's the rollerskating, Nikki walking on the roof, rolling the casket into the hearse, and then of course the grandmother hugging her granddaughter at graduation. I think that's the most important shot in the film, when she says I love you. But the closeups are a consistent part of the style of the film, even though I worked with seven different cinematographers. I wanted to be in tight, I explained that to each of them

With a strong relationship, did you feel that you were influencing events?

Oh, yes. I influence my subjects. It always happens. It varied from person to person--I had very little influence on Nikki; she would have gone to university whether I d been there or not. With Wanda I had a huge influence. I don t know if Wanda would have gone into treatment without me. In the cemetery scene, Wanda breaks down and opens up to her whole family as well as me and the camera about how she felt a failure as a mother, and responsible for Terrell s death. She talked about wanting to go into treatment. Three weeks later nothing had happened. I wanted to follow up with Wanda, I asked her why she hadn t gone into treatment, and she started making excuses. I had a phone number of a treatment center on me, from another film I was working on. I gave her the phone number, she made the call, and the treatment center, Haymarket, said we have a long waiting list, call us back in two weeks. This is what happens to lots of people suffering from addiction, and it doesn t work. You have to get them when they re ready. So I got on the phone and said, I'm making a documentary, it s gonna be on HBO, and of course suddenly everything is different, and that very day I drove her over. I filmed that footage of me talking on the phone but it never made it in because of an office fire. Fortunately thanks to my wife s prompting—my wife who is not a filmmaker--I had made duplicates of most of the material.

Did anyone ever want to stop participating?

No one ever gave up participating, but they joined in at their own pace. I wanted to follow Wanda earlier on, but she was totally inaccessible. It took three years for her to open the door. The first person who was welcoming was the grandmother, and then Alaissa. Nikki was somewhat resistant. It was tough having me follow her. She was in high school, and she lived a secret life to a certain degree. She went to a private Catholic school, her friends didn t know she lived in the homes, or her mom was on welfare. In the projects her peers called her little white girl because she was trying to go the straight path. And here I am pressing the questions on her. The most difficult character was Jack, Terrell s brother. I wish he could have been more integrated into the story. He was very important but I didn t have access. For all the positive changes, he doesn t go that way; he stays stuck. Not everybody in the family made these great turnarounds.

The key to them letting me in their lives was Terrell. It was me going there, to look at something very positive and that they could be proud of, and that was Terrell. They were more than willing to let me in to tell the story of their son and grandson. We started off on the right foot and then we clicked.

The structure of the film is very tight, organized around the family's desire to meet the expectations set by Terrell before his death. The narration is expositional, and stresses the organization. How did the structure and narration evolve?

I wrote the narration, in numerous drafts. First I was going to have Alaissa do it. Alaissa and I sat down, we corrected it for errors, we changed the language, and then I showed it to HBO. Nancy Abraham and Sheila Nevins talked a lot about Nikki and what a powerful person she was and how she was the center of the story, even though there's less footage of her than anybody. They found her extremely attractive and interesting. So I said maybe Nikki should narrate, and they were absolutely behind it. So I went to Nikki, and it was the same process.

I was really concerned about losing my audience at the beginning, that people would say, Another story about poor people in the projects suffering. So I did everything I could to show that things would change, including having Nikki say that. I thought of starting with her getting married, and the rest of it as backstory. But I couldn t make that work, so I decided to stick with the linear unfolding of events as they happen.

Did you choose not to film, when it might have been something illegal or dangerous?

I didn t have to leave something out, but the one issue I had was showing Alaissa working while she was collecting welfare. It was her choice; I thought it was really important to include, because it s a reality of everybody on welfare. She had been fined before, so she knew the worst was that she had to pay back what she made. She has had to pay it back, too.

How much of a say did HBO have in shaping the film?

HBO was very helpful in shaping it. They looked at a number of cuts. Nancy, Sheila and Geoff Bartz looked at it. They were very helpful with the editing process, in terms of structuring. I think they were most helpful in terms of knowing what has to go. The most difficult thing with a long project like this is to throw your babies out to serve the story. They know their audience, and they are highly respectful of the filmmaker. They had no set length requirement. We went from four hours to three to two, and I thought I was there, and they felt it was too long, so we talked about places to cut.

How does the family benefit from the success of the film?

I've committed to splitting the profits 50/50, but of course there aren't any profits yet. I explained in detail the way documentaries work to them. They knew they weren't going to get real money out of this. But they see that their story can positively affect other people.