

BROKEN PLACES

Director's Statement

Having spent the better part of the past forty years making films about intergenerational poverty, child welfare, and health disparities, I've often wondered why some children are severely damaged by early adversity while others are able to thrive. Ernest Hemingway had a poignant way of describing this enigma in A Farewell to Arms where he wrote, "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places." Hemingway's observation about adversity and resilience captured the key question I wanted to address in my 33rd national public television documentary, BROKEN PLACES. Experts have long understood that there is a strong statistical correlation between early adversity and poor mental and physical health outcomes. Instead of rehashing this correlation, I realized that I was sitting on a unique film archive that could enable me to dramatically illustrate how the trauma experienced by the children we filmed decades ago ultimately shaped their lives as adults. After paying to keep my films and videos in a climate-controlled storage facility for four decades, I finally had an opportunity to put some of my old footage to good use. I revisited about a dozen film subjects I profiled as children or teenagers and chose three of the most moving stories to update with my film crew. Ultimately, we were able to offer viewers a unique time-lapse perspective on how the young people we profiled decades ago evolved into the adults they are today. Although there have been other documentaries on this topic, none have been able to present the devastating impact of childhood trauma or the remarkable characteristics of resilience in the context of moving stories that span decades.

In BROKEN PLACES we interweave these longitudinal narratives with commentary from a few nationally renowned experts. Before my interviews with these experts, I asked them to screen the stories of our subjects, so instead of making broad, abstract, general comments, their observations are grounded in moving narratives. In addition to shedding light on exciting new developments in neuroscience, they also help explain the kind of life outcomes we reveal - why some of our subjects were able to make it while others were not. Along the way, they also help answer some far-reaching questions. How does early adversity affect the brain of young children? Why are some children resilient while others are not? Is resilience determined by genes, the environment, or some interaction between the two? Can we identify children who are likely to be resilient as well as children likely to experience bad mental and physical health outcomes down the road? What kinds of early childhood interventions strengthen resilience, and how can we make these interventions widely available to the children most at risk? I believe that the answers to these questions hold the keys to solving the greatest public health crisis we face today.