

**An Interview with  
Nina Gilden Seavey  
Producer/Director/Writer  
THE OPEN ROAD: AMERICA LOOKS AT AGING**

**How did you get interested in doing a documentary on aging?**

The National Council on the Aging and a consultant I had worked with on a prior film about polio asked me to do a film about Baby Boomers retiring and civic engagement — how to get retirees to become involved in their communities. I surveyed the films that had been done on aging and it struck me that almost all of them dealt with health issues like Alzheimer's and depression, or family issues like care giving, what I see as the abnormal issues or problems of aging. I didn't see anything that dealt with aging in a normative way — looking at the opportunities found in aging as well as obstacles inherent in longevity, and examining how everyday people without major health issues could successfully anticipate and navigate these obstacles. So I saw a need for a film that was broader than the topic of civic engagement — a film that looked at the wide variety of opportunities and challenges that all Boomers will face as we age.

**I notice you said “we.” As a Baby Boomer, had you begun to think about aging?**

No! Never! I'd thought growing old was something old people did, and I'm not going to get old! Seriously, I don't think Boomers identify with the aging process. Our image of aging is like the opening scenes of my film — Sun City and shuffleboard — “killing time before it kills you.” That's not us and never will be. Boomers think of aging as a ‘problem,’ and we don't like to think about problems. We think about solutions. In our minds, we're revolutionaries who came of age in the 1960's and 70's — refusing to conform to conventions or to do something just because it's always been done that way. So I saw this film as a way to change my generation's view of aging, and influence how we approach it.

**THE OPEN ROAD is subtle in the way it addresses aging issues. Why did you take this approach?**

The film begged to be a public affairs film — experts talking about the issues with snippets of stories and anecdotes that supported their theories. But that's not what would make for a great film that people would want to watch from start to finish. For me, it had to be a people-oriented film. I believe viewers connect with people and with well-crafted stories that have broader implications, so the challenge was in finding individuals whose stories were representative of people facing these larger issues. I had to make the individuals bigger than their personal stories.

**Talk about your process. How did you know what topics and issues to address, and how did you find the people in the film?**

I read and I read and I read — absorbing as much information as I could until I felt I had a sense of the five or six really salient issues that Boomers will have to face. For instance,

I knew I had to find stories that told about the fear individuals face as they enter retirement, about thinking you've prepared and finding out you haven't, and about taking time to chill and then going back to something new and different. I knew I had to show that there are many different roads people can take. Retirement, or aging, is not a linear process — it's a trajectory that can take many routes and twists and turns along the way.

A good analogy is that the film represents a relay race, and that each transfer of the baton symbolizes a different opportunity or obstacle that spans the "Third Phase" life cycle — all the way from the moment of retirement to legacy. It's an interesting and complicated story with multiple, intersecting plot lines.

### **And the people — what did you look for and how did you find them?**

My staff and I interviewed hundreds of people — 50 or 60 for every person we decided to film. I needed people whose stories revealed a transformation that Boomers will have to face. Most of all, I wanted people who had *insight* into their own condition. Lots of people have experience but no insight into it. The camera is very cold and hard. It cuts to the bone. The stories had to stand up to its probing, truth-telling eye.

We went all over the country to film because I was also determined that the stories represent America, with all of its diversity. So we have people in the northeast and the southwest, the midwest and the west. And we have retirees who are well-off and those who have been forced to go back to work; those who have picked up something new and those who have returned to something old. But the key thing is that their stories tell us so much about what opportunities and obstacles await us.

### **And the experts — how did you select them?**

In my reading and research, they stood out to me because they each focus on the normative, as opposed to the pathological or abnormal aspects of aging. For instance, Dr. McKhann has written about healthy aging and the difference it makes when one maintains purpose outside of oneself, engages with the world, and embraces a life that is not centered around "what time is the ballgame on today?" All four experts emphasize dealing with obstacles, including the really difficult ones, and taking advantage of opportunities. They are the anchors in the film, keeping us aware of what these stories are all about.

### **Did you have many surprises in making the film?**

The biggest surprise — in fact, shock — was that Mike, our cab driver, died not long after we filmed him, and he was the youngest person in the group.

Also, it was really a surprise to find out that Judy, one of the most upbeat, hardworking, giving people we met, had a very difficult time finding a job when she had to go back to work. In the film, we see this happy person who loves her job at Home Depot, and it's obvious everyone she deals with loves her. Hearing her tell of how many companies had rejected her made me realize that she had been a victim of age discrimination.

Another surprise to me was to find how open to change Helen Glawe is at age 92. I guess I expected her to be like my image of older people — afraid of new things, afraid of the "other" in society, afraid of change. But she was just the opposite. She embraces the new—just as she welcomes the immigrants she is tutoring.

### **What are the three things you hope THE OPEN ROAD accomplishes?**

First of all, I hope it is a wake up call. In doing this film, I found that Baby Boomers by and large haven't got a clue about what lies ahead of them. Moreover, I don't think society recognizes that 77 million Boomers reaching retirement age represents a huge demographic transformation, and we don't know what it will mean because we haven't even thought about it. I hope this film helps people start thinking and planning.

Second, my wish is that Boomers will watch it and realize that we *are* aging, and that the road before us is wide open. It goes without saying that we will challenge our parents' paradigm of retirement, but what is the new paradigm that we will create?

Third, society has to shift how it thinks about retirement and aging. Business, nonprofits, government — across the board — will have to change how they function to accommodate the healthiest, wealthiest, best educated, and most active generation in American history. Every aspect of society will be affected — hopefully for the better.

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