



P.O.V. 'THE SELF-MADE MAN'

by Susan Stern

Tuesday, July 26 2005, 10 p.m. on PBS (Check local listings)

Filmmaker's Statement

I never intended to make a “personal film” and doubt that I will do so again. Before making films, I was a journalist for 20 years. It is other people's stories that have fascinated me. But when my father left me an unprecedented home video of his decision to take his own life rather than endure serious illness, I felt that I had to make a film – because the story was so newsworthy – and that my father had given me permission to do it. My research very quickly gave me another motivation. I found out that my father was far from unique: White men over 75 have a suicide rate four times the national average – way higher than the rate for teenagers. I felt that my family's story would be important to other families.

But having said the word “suicide” I've put my finger on one of the most difficult parts of making **The Self-Made Man** – figuring out what – and whom – the film is about. It took more research, into the history of “rational suicide,” the phenomena of “elder suicide” and into my father's own medical condition, until I felt I could confidently assert that my father's choice was, in fact, different from what we normally think of as suicide. My father's suicide was not a suicide of depression – and there is, I found out, a history, and lengthening collection of news stories, about others who have done the same thing.

The Self-Made Man actually has a lot of other themes besides whether or not choosing death can ever be rational and good. There's the dynamics of a family with a strong – even dominating – patriarch. There's the subplot about solar power and social entrepreneurship. There's the questioning of the American glorification of independence and “self-making.” There's my own relationship to my father. Some people had urged me to make this a film about my own journey of discovery. But I decided it was really more of a portrait of my father than it was about me. I feel that Bob Stern's creativity, scorn for material things, and drive to do good in the world make him an inspiring, interesting character, a model businessman, no matter how he ended his life.

I asked my family to do the film – and shot the key interview with my mother and brother – within a month of my father's death. My family is very private, and I am very grateful for their cooperation and trust. They like the film, even though they would have made small changes if I had let them. I tried to report this story as I would have any other – telling the truth as I saw it even if it was painful. People have asked me if there was family darkness or dysfunction that I left out – and I sure can't think of any.

My greatest joy in making the film was getting to record 24 hours of the gorgeous landscape of my family's California ranch on 16 mm film, and experiment with different 16 mm film stocks as well as 8 mm film stocks to paint the landscape in an expressive way. I love the time lapse shot cinematographer Charlie Gruet did of the shadow of the hill creeping up on the ranch house and way Charlie lit the inside of the house to spill outside, so we could shoot the pre-dawn darkness. I also loved working on the original score with composer Marco D'Ambrosio to create what we jokingly called a "Klezmer Western" sound – a score befitting my father, who some had called "the last Jewish cowboy." Best of all, making the film gave me a chance to spend three more years with my father. I feel like I really got a chance to "see" him and let go of him by making the film – even though he's still always in my head, giving me advice and joking around.

The really surprising thing about the film, though, is how events have kind of caught up with it. Though I had been following the Terri Schiavo case for more than a year, its sudden explosion into the media spotlight has brought new attention to the issue of who gets to say how we die. In 2005, right-to-die legislation has also been introduced in California and Arizona and the Supreme Court has agreed to review Oregon's physician-assisted suicide law. Two films about euthanasia – *Million Dollar Baby* and *The Sea Inside* – also won Academy Awards this year. All of this has confirmed for me the idea that the issue of choice in dying is one that people need to discuss. I hope that **The Self-Made Man** will prompt families to discuss their end-of-life choices with each other, and record their wishes in advanced directives and living wills.

- Susan Stern
Producer/Director