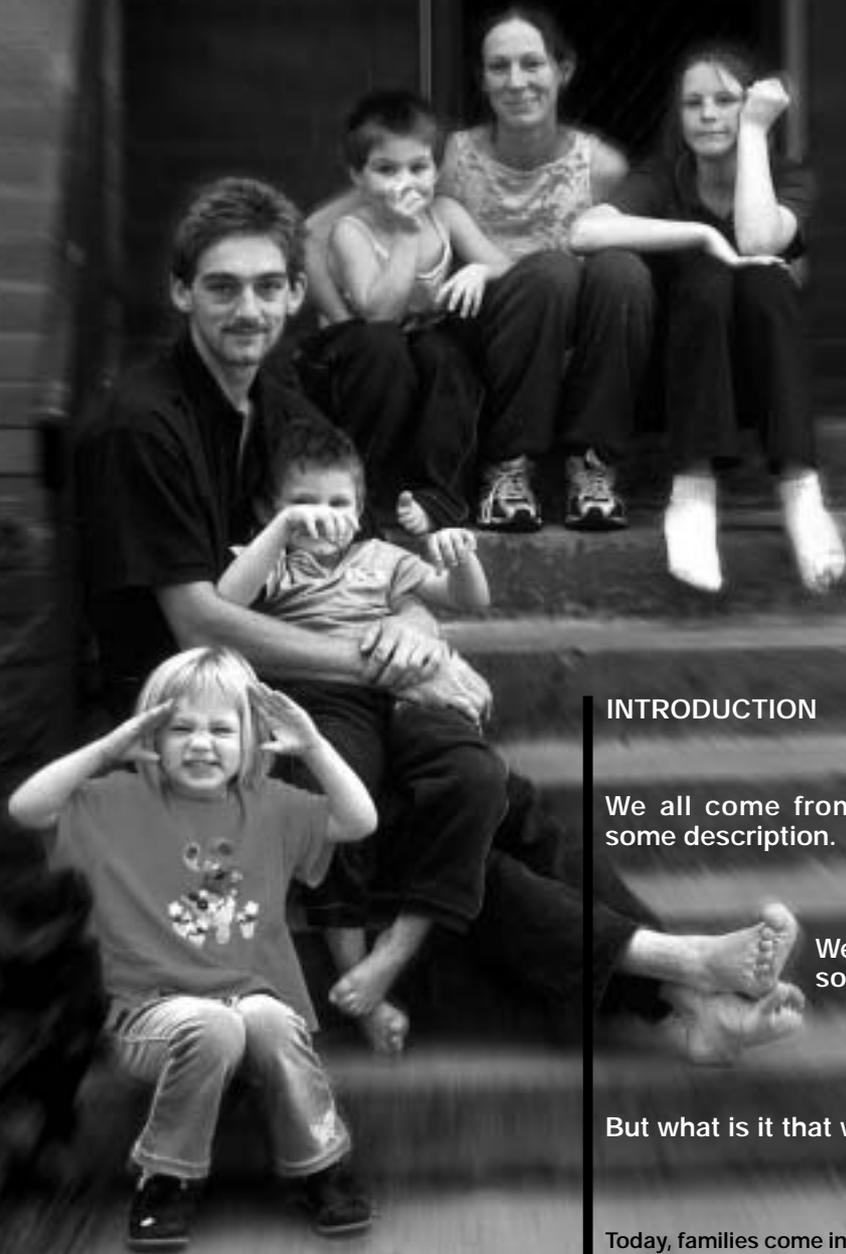


# Family Foibles



NICK WILSON



## STUDYGUIDE

### INTRODUCTION

We all come from a family of some description.

We all need to belong in some way.

But what is it that we belong to?

Today, families come in all shapes, sizes and combinations, as people in all walks of life adjust to, experiment with and incorporate the idea of 'family' into the complex web of relationships in which they find themselves entangled.

*FAMILY FOIBLES* IS A SERIES OF FIVE HALF-HOUR DOCUMENTARIES that examine contemporary Australian families. Each story revolves around a family confronting a problem. These range from the relatively benign issue of omission in the telling of a family history to domestic violence and the threat of family break-up.

The series is challenging to watch at times. It is entertaining as well, and should engage viewers with the diversity of subjects and the intimate nature of the stories. The film-makers' methods range from strictly observational (fly on the wall) to active involvement (where the director is a participant in the family's drama).

The characters in these films are variously searching for their identities within their family ('The Woodcutter's Son'), discovering a hidden family history ('Mick's Gift'), struggling to hold a family together ('Kim and Harley and the Kids'), attempting a novel response to separation ('Upstairs Downstairs'), or trying to break from entrenched custom ('My Mother Nancy'). In their struggles, the participants encounter varying degrees of resistance, conflict and heartbreak. Some achieve a more satisfying knowledge and appreciation of their family.

### Curriculum Links

These documentaries are not suitable for secondary students at junior or middle year levels. The material contained in these documentaries could be confronting and upsetting to viewers (particularly students from divorced or abusive families). The content is relevant to V.C.E. level SOSE, Human Development, English, Media Studies and Psychology. At the tertiary level, it is suitable for Counseling, Social Work, Sociology, Psychology and Media Studies.

### GENERAL INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

- Ask one of your family members to list six qualities they associate with you. Ask a friend to make a similar list. Explore and explain the differences in these two lists. (This activity introduces concepts relating to subjectivity and perspective,

complex issues which may require detailed class discussion.)

- Write a short history of your family. Consider how you choose what to include and what to exclude: how do you decide the key features and events that define your family?
- Draw a diagram of your family tree. This may require the assistance of your grandparents or other relatives.
- Interview an elderly relative or friend and find out what their childhood was like. What are their strongest memories?
- Interview a sibling and compare their thoughts about family with your own. How different are your impressions of family life and your childhood? What factors might account for these differences?
- What is the relationship between photographs and memories? Each of the films (except 'Kim and Harley and the Kids') uses family photographs in one way or another. Bring in a family photograph that is important to you and describe it to the class.
- If you have access to a video camera, record a family event such as an anniversary or birthday to share with the class. Use this experience to reflect on some of the techniques used and the choices made by the *Family Foibles* film-makers.
- Compare one of the families from this series with a family in an English text you are studying this year.
- Allan Martin does volunteer work for Ozanam House (a centre for the homeless). Kim relies on the Salvation Army for food vouchers and food handouts. What does this indicate about the importance of these organizations to people at the lower end of the economic spectrum? Contact a couple of charitable organizations such as these to discover what they do and to build a profile of the recipients of this kind of charity.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION POINTS

#### The Documentary

- In what ways might the presence of the camera affect those taking part in the films? (Refer to the directors' statements at the end of the sections on 'The Woodcutter's Son', 'Mick's Gift' and 'My Mother

Nancy' for detailed information.)

- Do you see any happy 'foibles'? Each story deals with some kind of family conflict. Do you think that conflict is essential to narrative? Does it make for more dramatic and entertaining storytelling?
- In each story, there are grounds for the viewer to be optimistic about the possible outcomes for the characters involved. Speculate on the ways in which the various conflicts in each story might be resolved.
- Do you feel that some of these films position the viewer as a voyeur? If so, give examples. (The concept of voyeurism may require further explanation by the teacher.)
- Do you think any of the film-makers have exploited their subjects? How? Give specific examples of any incidents you found exploitative. Does this affect your reaction to the film? In what ways?
- No film can ever be an objective record of reality. Film-makers always have an agenda, whether this is explicit or not. How would you describe these film-makers' agendas? (Again, refer to the directors' statements at the end of the sections on 'The Woodcutter's Son', 'Mick's Gift' and 'My Mother Nancy' for material on the film-maker's motivations.)
- In 'Mick's Gift', Mick's son, Michael, does not appear; in 'The Woodcutter's Son', Allan's mother and his sister, Joan, do not appear. What are some possible reasons for this? For example, they may have declined to appear or the film-makers may have chosen not to use footage of them in the final film. Examine both these scenarios. If someone was making a film about a conflict in your family, would you want to be involved? Why or why not?
- Donna Swan, the director of 'Upstairs Downstairs', is an old family friend of Harald and Louise's, having known them both since their university days. The film was predicated on a longstanding relationship of trust. How important do you think it is for the subjects of these films to trust the documentarians responsible for telling their stories?

## The Family

- How do these films make you feel about your own family?
- List six qualities of a good parent.
- What are some things that your parents do that you would choose to do as a parent?
- What are some things that your parents do that you would choose *not* to do as a parent?
- What makes being a parent difficult?
- What makes being a parent worthwhile?
- Why do people become parents?
- Do you think mothers and fathers should have different roles in their children's lives?
- What makes being a son or daughter difficult?
- What makes being a son or daughter worthwhile?
- Do you hope to have children? Why or why not?
- How significant is class as a factor in the lives of the families depicted? Describe the economic and social differences between the working-class and the middle-class families depicted. Can you escape your own class background? What factors have determined your family's current class status (for example, parental education and employment)?
- What is your earliest memory?
- Did you have a happy childhood? What makes a childhood happy?
- In what ways does our family influence our identity?
- In 'Upstairs Downstairs', Harald says that Louise felt they needed to share the demands of parenting 50/50. What are some reasons why women tend to do more hands-on parenting in a child's early years?
- Who does what in your family? Draw up a chart of weekly chores in your household, including meal preparation, laundry, dishes, etc. In a column next to each activity, note who does what. At the end of the week, add up the number of hours each member of the family spends on maintaining the household. Is everyone in your family happy with the distribution of labour? If not, how can it be changed to make things more equitable?
- We all take on or are ascribed roles



in our families, which then tend to determine our lives and from which it can be difficult to break out. Examples of these kinds of labels include: 'black sheep', 'conciliator', 'difficult one', 'youngest', 'eldest', 'responsible', 'irresponsible', and so on. Can you identify any roles ascribed to you within your own family? What are the advantages or disadvantages of these labels?

## Relationships

- What are some common reasons for the breakdown of relationships within families?
- In each film, relationships have broken down or are strained to breaking point. Identify these failed and failing relationships, then decide why they have failed or are failing.
- We all experience stress and conflict. Choose two characters from any one of the films and describe the situations that cause them stress and how they deal with this. Can you suggest some positive ways they might cope with their situations?
- What causes you stress in your relationships? How do you deal with it? Describe a conflict you have with a family member. How have you attempted to resolve this? Are you optimistic this situation can be improved? Why/why not?
- Do men and women communicate differently? If you think they do, what implications does this have for

relationships within the family and for the resolution of conflicts?

- Imagine you are married or have a long-term partner. How would



you like family responsibilities to be divided up? What do you expect from your partner?

## 'MICK'S GIFT'

### Synopsis

The late Mick Hudson was an adventurer and amateur film-maker whose life has been mythologised within his family. In searching for the

TITLE PAGE: 'KIM AND HARLEY AND THE KIDS'; THIS PAGE: 'MICK'S GIFT' - TOP: MICK'S YOUNGEST DAUGHTER ANNIE; BOTTOM: DIRECTOR CELESTE GEER, MICK'S GRANDDAUGHTER



'real' Mick through his films of 1950s Australia and the memories of loved ones, contradictory images emerge which intrigue the film-maker. Her questions may prompt the viewer to consider what is included and omitted from their own family histories.

### Discussion Points and Activities

- Mick changed from a gregarious young adventurer into a withdrawn and isolated elderly man. How can you account for this change? What do you think your grandparents would have been like as young people?
- Mick's eldest daughter, Rosemary, says that Mick and his friends did 'whatever it is that men do together'. What does she mean?
- Mick's wife, Joan, was busy with her newborn son, Michael, and did not even know that Mick had attended and filmed the 1956 Olympics. What other indications does the documentary contain that suggest that Mick and Joan lived somewhat separate lives, despite being married with children?
- Was Mick and Joan's life together happy? Why/why not? Use evidence from the film to support your argument.
- Rosemary says that viewing Mick's films has shown her another side of her father, as a man and as a person. Have you ever had an experience that allows you to consider your parents outside of their relationship

to you?

- For most of his life, Mick was a practicing Catholic. Why do you think he stopped attending church?
- Mick took a great deal of pride in the way he mowed the lawn. What do you think this says about his personality?
- Joan talks about determinedly remembering the good times rather than the unhappy times. What do you think of this philosophy for life? Write a brief account of a happy event or episode in your life. Now write an account of a sad time. Consider the old saying, 'Least said, soonest mended'. What does this mean? Is it sometimes better to forget about painful incidents in our family's history? Why/why not?
- At the end, the film-maker says, 'Now I know why one of my mum's favourite sayings was, "Don't let the sun go down on an argument"'. What do you think she is getting at? Do you think this is a useful rule for life? If so, why?
- Why do you think Mick loved to travel?
- Do you think Mick was a 'typical bloke' of his generation? Ask one of your grandparents or an elderly friend about relationships between the sexes in their day.
- Mick's business was obviously an important source of his self-respect. How would he have felt when his electrical business failed? Imagine he came to you for advice

at this time: what would you have suggested?

- As a child, the film-maker's relationship with her grandfather was clearly different to those of the older people who appear in the documentary. Explain the



differences in these relationships. Write an account of your relationship with an elderly member of your own family. Contrast this with a sibling or cousin's relationship with the same person.

### Comments From The Director of 'Mick's Gift', Celeste Geer

About three weeks after I started film school, my grandma, Joan, told me that my late grandfather, Mick, had also been interested in film-making. In the following weeks, I found, cleaned and spliced together over 30 reels of film, which comprise the four-hour archive of Mick's footage. But the journey did not stop with the discovery of this treasure; I had to work out what the treasure meant.

Initially I showed Mick's footage to members of my family to see if they could identify the people in the films and tell me where and when certain footage had been taken. But even with this seemingly straightforward task, I started to notice just how differently

people manage their memories. It also became clear that there were parts of Mick's life that no-one in his family knew anything about.

The question of 'how well do you ever really know anyone?' was a central theme of my 18-minute documentary, *Framing Mick*, which I made at film school. Two years later, the opportunity arose for me to develop the film for the *Family Foibles* series. Equipped with a professional budget and the assistance of a producer, editor and a professional crew, I set about making 'Mick's Gift', a character study, not



only of Mick, but of the people who were close to him. I could have used Mick's footage to tell a myriad of different stories. 'Mick's Gift' is simply one possible collection of a family's memories and silences.

### ON THE PRESENCE OF THE CAMERA

The camera can inhibit or liberate, silence or validate, but rarely can it be ignored. I found that the more the interviewee trusts the interviewer, the easier it is for them to become engaged in the conversation and not be too distracted by the camera's presence. I was very fortunate in that Rosemary, Miles and Annie all love to tell stories and they are confident and articulate. While I don't think they were intimidated by the camera, sometimes you notice their answers are slowed

down a bit by some internal editing. On the other hand, my gran is never impulsive in the way she answers questions, so the consideration that she applies to her answers on camera is in keeping with her character.

The camera can have different meanings in different contexts. When I interviewed my family for *Framing Mick*, the camera was operated by a fellow student and it was capturing images that were only likely to be seen by a small audience. The camera in 'Mick's Gift' was operated by a professional camera person and everyone knew that the images were destined for broadcast on national television. So while the size of the camera was the same in both shoots,



the interviewees' knowledge of the size of the intended audience for the second set of interviews may have impacted on the intimacy of my conversations with them (and inspired my mum to put on a bit of lippiel!).

### ON THE SHOOTING RATIO

I shot a total of 16 hours of footage for 'Mick's Gift' (eight of which had been shot previously for my student film). In addition to the characters that you are introduced to in the film, I



interviewed another five members of Mick's family, including his son, his brother and sister-in-law and his niece. Various reasons guided my decision not to include excerpts from these interviews in the film. In some instances, the people interviewed were not very compelling to watch; they gave superficial descriptions of their memories and did not really invest any emotion in their answers



to my questions. In another instance, I chose not to include an interview that I conducted with my uncle in London via a video conferencing facility, partly because the image looked too degraded compared to the rest of the interviews.

### ON MOTIVATION

One of my aims in making 'Mick's Gift' was to invite audiences to question the way their own family communicates, resolves conflicts and shares private memories. For this reason, I selected excerpts from the various character's interviews that would be specific enough to create an impression of Mick as a real character, while still

'MICK'S GIFT' - L-R: MICK THE ADVENTURER IN NEW YORK CIRCA 1940 (FROM HIS 16MM MOVIE FOOTAGE); MICK'S ELDEST DAUGHTER ROSEMARY, THE FILM-MAKER'S MOTHER; MICK'S DAUGHTER ROSEMARY (LEFT) AND WIFE JOAN; MICK HUDSON IN HIS FISHING HEYDEY (FROM HIS 16MM MOVIE FOOTAGE); JOAN HUDSON, MICK'S WIDOW; MICK AND JOAN SOON AFTER THEY MET (CIRCA 1940)



allowing the audience enough space to reflect on their own circumstances.

The other main resource that I drew on in the making of 'Mick's Gift' was Mick's archival footage. There was over four hours of the old footage, with about one third of that total being devoted to loving pans across Mick's lawn! Lots of factors determined which parts of the footage I chose to use, ranging from technical quality to the length of the shot (film stock is more expensive than video, so Mick couldn't afford to film long sequences). I also wanted to strike a balance between public events (the 1956 Olympic Games, the New York skyline) and private events (kids on the lawn, fishing), while also conveying a sense of the times in which Mick lived.

The desire to understand more about my grandfather and place my childhood memories in context in light of the discovered footage led me to make *Framing Mick*. The responses within my family to my student film meant that my motivations shifted when I came to make 'Mick's Gift'. In 'Mick's Gift', I was more alert to the subjectivity of memory. I was also interested in exploring the notion of privacy and the cost of protecting it across the generations. Emotions are my mum's currency; as a psychologist she deals with them daily. My mum likes to confront the uncomfortable and is not afraid of conflict or tears. Just one generation away is my gran, who is the first to admit that if something is unpleasant she just shuts it out of her mind and doesn't let it worry her. I wanted to explore how these very

different approaches to life and human emotions impact on Rosemary and Joan's relationship, and the extent to which they are able to understand one another's perspectives.

The process of making 'Mick's Gift' has taught me that the methods people use to locate, understand and articulate their emotions are developed through the circumstances of their life. I respect both Rosemary and Joan's different approaches to their pasts and feel that I have a better understanding of the circumstances that brought about these different ways of living.

I feel that I know a lot more about where I come from as a result of having made 'Mick's Gift'. It is easy to go through life knowing your mother simply as your mother or your grandmother simply as your grandmother—it



has been really rewarding to come to understand these members of my family as individuals outside the context of their relationships to me. And as it says in the film, I now understand why my mum always says 'never let the sun go down on an argument'.

## 'KIM AND HARLEY AND THE KIDS'

### Synopsis

Kim and her family live on a Housing Commission estate in outer



Melbourne. Kim has four children, including four-year-old twins. Her partner, Harley, is father to the three youngest. Gabrielle, at 12 years old, has taken on many of the family responsibilities that her mother cannot cope with. Their struggle to manage on the welfare and charity handouts that they receive makes gruelling viewing. Physical poverty and emotional frustration are expressed in a sequence of abusive and violent encounters (at one stage Harley is locked up for four days). Viewers will be



shocked and the film's raw quality will jolt their consciences. 'Kim and Harley and the Kids' poses many complex

questions and we are left wondering how the wider community can assist families such as Kim and Harley's, families facing such desperate and intractable difficulties.

### Discussion Points and Activities

- The press release states, 'Kim is never short of an idea when the fridge is empty', and 'Kim and Harley apply great resourcefulness, humour and resilience to their situation'. Do you agree? Give examples.
  - **Why do you think Kim and Harley stay together?**
  - **What does Gabrielle, Kim's eldest daughter, play in the family? Do you think she is treated fairly?**
  - **Why does Harley lock Gabrielle in her room? How do you think Gabrielle might feel about this?**
- Gabrielle says she feels sorry for both Harley and her mother. Why do you think she feels this way?



'KIM HARLEY AND THE KIDS' - CLOCKWISE: THE KIDS; L-R: GABBY, AMY AND THE TWINS; KIM; KIM (RIGHT) WITH DAUGHTER GABBY (12) AND ONE OF THE TWINS

- Is Gabrielle doomed to follow Kim's path? Compare her story with Louise's in 'Upstairs Downstairs'.
- Harley participates in an anger management course. What might this involve? What makes you angry in your family? How do you deal with these feelings?
- How are domestic responsibilities divided in Kim and Harley's household?
- Harley says the most important things to him are his children and Kim. How does he show this? Why do you think family is important to Harley?
  - **Kim has Hepatitis C.** What is this disease and how does it affect sufferers? How does a person contract this disease? How common is it?
  - **Kim and Harley live in poverty.** List four moments in the film that show the extent of their poverty and how they deal with it (scrounging cigarette butts, going to the ATM at 2am, hocking Gabby's Game-Boy, the empty fridge, Kim begging money from relatives, Kim asking for assistance from the Salvos, Kim collecting scrap metal).
- Consider money in relation to this family. How do you think Kim and Harley are coping? How much income do you think they would generate? Contact Centrelink and find out what benefit Kim would receive as a mother with four dependents and as a recipient of a health pension. Kim and Harley live in a Housing Commission house. How much rent would they be paying?
- What more could the state do for this family?
- List the key factors that have led to Kim and Harley's desperate situation (for example, drug addiction, lack of education, unemployment, poor health, no extended family). Suggest ways these problems can be addressed, both at a personal



level and in terms of social policy initiatives.

- Given their circumstances, can you suggest anything that Kim and Harley could do that would improve their lives and the lives of their children?
- One of the themes of this documentary is domestic violence. Kim says that while being bashed destroys one's self-esteem, at the same time, given her background of abuse and poverty, violence is much like

'blowing your nose'. What might she mean by this?

- 'Kim and Harley and the Kids' ends on a slightly positive note: the car is registered, the family is enjoying a BBQ, Kim is shown smiling. Why do you think the film-makers chose this ending? What do you think the future holds for this family?

### Comments From The Director of 'Kim and Harley and the Kids', Katrina Sawyer

I met Kim and her family when she enrolled in an introduction to video course at the local adult education centre where I teach. Halfway through the course, Harley started coming along, just because Kim was there, and he ended up staying. Despite the constant crises in their lives, they were very interested in documentary.

I kept in touch with Kim and Harley after the video course ended. Kim had



always wanted to make a documentary about what it is really like to be what she calls 'white trash' (others might call them 'battlers'). I found Kim to be a very strong character who is able to engage honestly and unselfconsciously with the camera. She is proud of her ability to keep her family together against the odds and wants people to see how hard it is.

## 'THE WOODCUTTER'S SON'

### Synopsis

Allan is 45 years old and a published poet. At 17, Allan's father told him if he ever went to jail he would lose his family. Allan became a notorious bank robber and his dad was proved right. Thirty years later, his father is dead and Allan is seeking a rapprochement with his mother and sister. In the meanwhile, he's found substitute families in jail and at the Ozanam Community Centre, where he spends time since his release from Pentridge. In 'The Woodcutter's Son', Allan travels back to country Victoria, to the town



of his youth, wondering which family he really belongs to—his substitute family of crims and street people who understand him, or the biological family to whom he is a stranger.

### Discussion Points and Activities

- How would you describe Allan's relationship with his father?
- Why do you think Allan's father chose not to visit him in jail?
- Why did Allan try to kill himself? What happened to him afterwards?
- Allan describes a very close relationship he developed with another man in prison. What does this say about the human need for connection? Why didn't they pursue this relationship on the outside?
- Do you think Allan might re-offend and return to jail? Why/why not?
- Does Allan fit with your idea of what a bank robber is like? Why/why not?
- Allan's sister, Elaine, says their parents had different expectations of Allan because he was a boy. Do you feel your parents have different expectations of you and your siblings? Why?
- Allan wasn't allowed to attend his father's funeral. What is the importance of rituals such as weddings, christenings and funerals in family life? Describe a special event in your family's history.
- Allan says he is an op-shop man looking for an op-shop woman. What does he mean by this?
- What purpose does Allan's poetry serve? Write a short poem about your family.
- Why are the photographs and clippings that Elaine has kept so important to Allan? Make a photomontage exploring the life of one of your relatives. How do you choose what matters, what characterizes this person?
- Allan notes that he and his father rarely spoke and that he wishes he could have done things differently. Could this have been a contributing factor to Allan's decision to lead a life of crime? Do you think this lack of communication between fathers and sons is unusual or common?



Do you find it easier to talk about personal problems to your mum or your dad? Why?

- Elaine accepts that Allan has done his time and should be given a new opportunity, but she explains that their mother can't bring herself to believe that he has changed. These differing attitudes are at the heart of the debate about rehabilita-

Son' was both very rewarding and incredibly stressful. It was rewarding in the sense that

I achieved what I planned for the film after Allan told me his story. I planned a structure for his story that wouldn't just be him telling an audience about his past, what had happened to him. I wanted a forward momentum to the narrative, I wanted the audience to wonder what was going to happen next. The train journey back to his home town achieved this, I think. It was also rewarding because Allan and his family liked the finished product; it wasn't the whole truth, but it enabled Allan to express many things about his life and his feelings that had long gone unheard.



tion. Whose attitudes do you agree with and why? Imagine you are an employer and an ex-convict applies to you for a job. How would you react?

- Considering Allan's suffering, he demonstrates a high degree of understanding and empathy towards his father. Which incident marked a turning point for Allan?



### Comments From The Director/Writer of 'The Woodcutter's Son', Michael Cummins

The making of 'The Woodcutter's

The process of making the film was stressful because I never knew from one day to the next whether Allan would pull out. His relationship with his family, particularly his mother, effected his daily emotional state at a very deep level. I only became aware of this over time. Two things got him through the

'THE WOODCUTTER'S SON' - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ALLAN WITH HIS NIECE AND SISTER ELAINE; ALLAN MARTIN; THE CENTRAL CHARACTER; DIRECTOR MICHAEL CUMMINS (LEFT) WITH ALLAN; ALLAN REMINISCES WITH HIS SISTER ELAINE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 'THE WOODCUTTER'S SON': ELAINE, ALLAN'S SISTER; 'UPSTAIRS DOWNSTAIRS': HARALD WITH DAUGHTER SOPHIA; DONNA SWAN, DIRECTOR OF THE DOCUMENTARY; HARALD AND LOUISE DISCUSS CHANGES TO THE PARENTING 'ROSTER'; SOPHIA

making of the film. The first was his strong desire to TELL HIS STORY, and the second was his trust in me.



### ON the Presence of the Camera

Allan loved the camera and played to it from the beginning. The interview on the very first day was the most emotional and the most 'truthful'. The only time he wasn't comfortable with the camera was in reciting his



poems to it. He is used to playing off an audience's reactions—the camera doesn't react, it records.

### ON the Shooting Ratio

Fourteen hours of film were shot and I included the footage I thought best told the story, the story of a man who wants his family's understanding and forgiveness.



## 'UPSTAIRS DOWNSTAIRS'

### Synopsis

Harald and Louise have ended their 14-year de facto relationship. They have a three-year-old daughter, Sophia. They do not want to break up the family home, even though they agree that the notion of staying together 'for the sake of the kids' is wrong. They have converted their house into two self-contained living areas. Sophia spends half her time with Harald upstairs and the other half downstairs with Louise, who is intent on establishing a 50/50, 'single-but-equal' parenting roster. While Harald and Louise are optimistic about their experiment, they don't underestimate the challenges to making it work.

### Discussion Points and Activities

- Harald and Louise were together as a couple for a long time before they had Sophia (one friend mentions



they were together at university). After Sophia's birth, Harald says the 'spark' disappeared. What does he mean? Why do you think Harald and Louise's relationship broke down? In what ways might having a child change a relationship?

- Harald says he wasn't really prepared to be a father. Can you prepare to be a parent? If so, how? If not, why not?
- In one scene, Sophia is overtired because Harald did not get her to bed on time. How does Louise react to this? What does this suggest about their relationship?

• **What happens** Louise's plans to go ballroom dancing? Why do you think the filmmakers decided to include this scene?

• **Think out** from a shot of Louise





slicing mushrooms and describing how Sophia has a vegetarian diet with her to a shot of sausages on a BBQ. This is a visual metaphor for the differences between Harald and Louise. Can you find other ways in which the film-makers convey information about their relationship?

- The family have lived like this for two years. Do you think this arrangement will continue to work? What factors might change that could make the situation more difficult? Do you think this arrangement is a good idea?
- How do you think Sophia will feel about her childhood when she is older?

- Towards the end of the film, Louise talks about her childhood. Her father was an abusive and violent man. She lived in a poor household and shared a bed with several brothers and sisters. Are you surprised when Louise reveals her personal history? Did you imagine she would have come from such a disadvantaged background? What does this say about the possibilities for class mobility? Are such transformations exceptional?
- What factors enable some couples to remain friends after divorce while others can't?



- What do you think of Harald and Louise's novel solution to 'breaking up'?
- Harald talks about his family background. In what ways does he want to be different from his father? What does being a good father entail?
- Why did Harald and Louise want to make this film? They explain their

reasons at the end. Do you agree with them?

## 'MY MOTHER NANCY'

### Synopsis

Nancy is 50 and a partner in a city café. Her business enterprise is seen as a challenge to the norms of her traditional, Italian Catholic community in Sydney, and she feels increasingly estranged from her family. She dutifully married when her parents wanted her to and raised a family of three



(including her daughter, Veronica, who directed this documentary). Now her husband refuses to set foot inside the café, which was opened without his approval. They live in the same house but communicate by notes. Everyone is talking of a family breakdown and her sisters criticize her bid for independence. Her children help out in the café and she is proud of her successful business, although she wonders whether she has sacrificed too much for it.

### Discussion Points and Activities

- Why does Nancy's family disapprove of her running the café?
- Why do you think Nancy and her husband have not divorced?
- The family priest states the church's position on divorce—marriage is

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 'UPSTAIRS DOWNSTAIRS': LOUISE WITH DAUGHTER SOPHIA; 'MY MOTHER NANCY': DIRECTOR VERONICA IACONO (RIGHT) INTERVIEWING HER SISTER ANNE; VERONICA (LEFT) WITH HER MOTHER NANCY; 'UPSTAIRS DOWNSTAIRS': HARALD AND LOUISE WITH DAUGHTER SOPHIA; CINEMATOGRAPHER JOANNE DONOHOE FILMING THE FAMILY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 'MY MOTHER NANCY': VERONICA INTERVIEWING HER BROTHER JOHN; NANCY AND HER BUSINESS PARTNER, TINA IN THE LONG AND SHORT CAFE; VERONICA (CENTRE) AND HER SISTER ANNE HELP THEIR MUM IN THE CAFE; NANCY IACONO AT THE LONG AND SHORT CAFE



a sacred institution and should not be dissolved. Do you think Nancy remains married for religious reasons?

- Like Mick in 'Mick's Gift', Nancy stops attending church. Why?
- Lea, Nancy's best friend, states: 'Doesn't matter whose fault it is, the woman gets the blame'. Why do you think this might be? Is this only true of the Italian Catholic community?
- Nancy uses her talent as a cook to help create a successful business. This is one motivation for her decision to open the café. What other reasons do you think motivated her to branch out on her own?
- Nancy believes she is being chastised because she is going against her family's ideas of 'what an Italian mother should be'. Is this a gender issue or a cultural issue, or a mixture of both?
- Research the cultural norms in various ethnic communities concerning the roles of men and women in families. How do these vary? What do you think about these variations?
- Nancy says she feels like she is 'in limbo. I can't go forward and I

can't go back'. Do you have any ideas about how she could resolve this situation? Have you ever felt similarly stuck? What happened?

- Nancy's children have strong ideas about how they think their mother should act. How do you think they should behave towards their parents in this situation?
- Our sympathy tends to be with Nancy because we do not hear her husband's point of view. However, Nancy is sympathetic towards her husband, despite the difficulties he creates for her. Why? What does she say that indicates her sympathy?
- Perhaps Nancy's husband also feels stuck. Maybe he feels that he is not being respected as the 'head of the household'. Write an account of the conflict from his point of view. Do you think a father is the head of a household? Talk to an elderly relative or family friend and find out how relationships within the family

and expectations of family life have changed over the generations.

### Comments From The Director/Writer/ Narrator of 'My Mother Nancy', Veronica Iacono

When I set out to make this film, I



thought it would be a way to get my mum to talk about her struggles and triumphs in breaking the mould of a traditional Italian woman. I also thought it would be a good way of getting my extended family to communicate and thus break our pattern of 'genetic feuding'. What I learnt was that you can't make people change just because you think they should (and because you are making a film). 'My Mother Nancy' is an intimate portrait of my mother's struggles and triumphs, but it is also an exploration of the family feuding that won't stop because no-one will talk about it.

### On the Presence of the Camera





Though the presence of camera initially affected those taking part in the film, it did not take long for the camera to be forgotten. The crew were skilful enough to let the action happen for the *verité* footage, and both mum and Tina continued working as though they weren't there. Being a relative of most of my subjects, the interviews were more like extended conversations. And though I started with a list of questions at the beginning of each interview, they were soon discarded as each conversation took its own shape.

### On the Shooting Ratio

This doco was filmed in Sydney. The production period consisted of two five-day blocks of shooting. I shot one week around Easter time and the other about six weeks later. I was paranoid that I had to get enough material because I knew there would not be the opportunity to go back and get pick-ups (I live in Melbourne). So I ended up with a little over 30 hours of footage. On top of this material, there was several hours of archive footage (home movies) that had to be selected and telecined from their original Super 8 format.

The subject matter of these 30 hours, mainly interviews, was very honest, emotional and often quite raw. I knew that the interviews had this quality because it was me having a conversation with my family, rather than just a director questioning their subject. After a while, the camera became incidental. As a result, the interviews were very personal and intimate discussions between mother and daughter, brother and sister. I knew that there were going to be parts of the interviews my family would not want shown, and I wanted to protect them. But as a director, I was aware that these raw moments were often

the most gripping. I knew I would face the dilemma of wanting to protect my family while also wanting to make a strong film. My mother was no help. As she drove me to the airport after all the shooting was done, I told her I would send her a rough cut of the film and she could tell me what she liked and disliked. She thought about it, looked straight into my eyes and said, 'I trust you'. This was the best and worst thing she could have said. I tried to remember what the film was really about (well, I knew it was about my mother, Nancy) and I tried to be as objective as I could about subjects on which I had very strong opinions. I think this struggle is part of the story of the film.

### On Motivation

I think my initial motivation for making the film was the idea that if I could get my mother to open up about her struggles and her triumphs, it would give her some peace. It might stem the guilt that she feels for striking out on her own and give her some perspective. I also thought it would give my extended family the opportunity to talk about things that are normally kept in the dark.

Clearly I knew nothing about my family! My extended family, and even my mother, live by a code of silence. They prefer to shut people out of their lives than have a dialogue and clear things up. We even came up with a term for this behaviour: 'genetic feuding'.

I thought this film would be an opportunity to stop the feuding and get some communication going: between my mum and dad, between mum and her sisters and the rest of her extended family who have silently ostracised her for striking out for herself. But the one thing I learnt was that I can't expect people to change, just because I think they should (and because doing so would give my story some shape!). So I shouldn't have been surprised when my father refused to be in the film. He is not prepared to change his views and habits, so who am I to tell him that I think it's a good idea?

When my parents' marriage unravelled, my sister moved out and I moved to a different state. I thought my family had *become* dysfunctional. But what I have learnt is that dysfunctional families perpetuate the same cycle, over and over again. So in fact my extended family, with their values and ideology firmly planted in Italy in the 1950s, are the dysfunctional ones! My little family of my mother, sister and brother were functioning, changing and still loving each other regardless. I can't change my parent's relationship or the way my extended family thinks, and I have stopped thinking I know what's best. I don't have a clue ...

### RESOURCES

#### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Women's Issues and Social Empowerment, *Domestic Violence Information Manual*  
<http://www.infoxchange.net.au/wise/DVIM/>

#### DIVORCE

Family Court of Australia  
<http://www.familycourt.gov.au/topic/index.html>

Australian Bureau of Statistics  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/ABS@.nsf/>

#### CRIME

Australian Institute of Criminology  
<http://www.aic.gov.au/index.html>

Crime in Australia  
<http://law.gov.au/ncp/publications/crime/index.htm>

#### PARENTING

Positive Parenting  
<http://www.positiveparenting.co/>

Shared Parenting  
<http://www.spig.clara.net/body.htm>

#### FAMILY

*Sociology: Themes and Perspectives 8, Family Life*

LEFT: MY MOTHER NANCY: FILM-MAKER VERONICA'S 4TH BIRTHDAY PARTY, WITH BROTHER JOHN AND MOTHER NANCY (FROM FAMILY SUPER-8 MOVIE FOOTAGE)



<http://www.usyd.edu.au/su/social/stp/family.html>

Australian Institute of Family Studies  
<http://www.aifs.org.au/home.html>

#### RELATIONSHIPS

<http://www.relate.gov.au/home.html>  
<http://www.relate.gov.au/links.html>

### CREDITS

#### *FAMILY FOIBLES*

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#### *'MICK'S GIFT'*

Writer/Director/Narrator: Celeste Geer  
Producer: Steve Thomas  
Associate Producer: Kim Anning  
Cinematography: James Short, Peter Zakharov  
Sound Recordists: Leonie Dickinson, Stephen Sculley  
Editor: Tony Stevens  
Music: Gareth Skinner

#### *'KIM AND HARLEY AND THE KIDS'*

Writer/Director: Katrina Sawyer  
Producer: Steve Thomas  
Associate Producer: Kim Anning  
Editor: Rosie Jones  
Cinematography: Jenni Meaney  
Sound Recordist: Leonie Dickinson  
Music: Ridgidigital Music—Al Mullins & Janine de Lorenzo

#### *'THE WOODCUTTER'S SON'*

Writer/Director: Michael Cummins  
Producer: Steve Thomas  
Associate Producer: Kim Anning  
Editor: Tony Stevens  
Cinematography: Kevin Anderson ACS  
Sound Recordists: Mark Tarpey, Chris Izzard  
Music: George Butrumlis

#### *'UPSTAIRS DOWNSTAIRS'*

Writer/Director: Donna Swan  
Producer: Steve Thomas  
Associate Producer: Kim Anning  
Editor: Tony Stevens  
Cinematography: Joanne Donahoe

Sound Recordists: Leonie Dickinson, Chris Izzard  
Music: Michael Havir

#### *'MY MOTHER NANCY'*

Writer/Director: Veronica Iacono  
Producer: Steve Thomas  
Associate Producer: Kim Anning  
Editor: Rosie Jones  
Cinematography: Joanne Parker  
Sound Recordist: Paul Finlay  
Music: Helen Mountfort

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