

Our Town

[snip] **And the winner is ... Iran!** So says University of Michigan historian Juan Cole in *Salon*: "The Shiites of Iraq increasingly realize they need Iranian backing to defeat the Sunni guerrillas and put the Iraqi economy right, a task the Americans

have proved unable to accomplish. And Iran will still be Iraq's neighbor long after the fickle American political class has switched its focus to some other global hot spot." —**Harold Henderson** | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com

On TV

Does Rehabilitation Work?

For his latest PBS documentary, *Tod Lending* spent three years following two ex-cons as they struggled to stay straight.

By Jeffrey Felshman

Documentarian Tod Lending has crossed the line between observer and participant a few times in his career, most recently a year and a half ago. He was in the middle of shooting his latest film, about two men who'd been in and out of prison, and one of his subjects, Leon Omar Mason, told him he was \$85 short on rent. "I thought, well, if I don't do anything I'm going to want to go and film him getting kicked out of his house and show that this is part of the struggle of reentering the community, trying to make it, blah blah blah," Lending says. "But on the other hand I'm thinking, how can I do that? What's he gonna think of me going there filming him getting kicked out of his house?" He gave him the \$85.

Journalists aren't supposed to do things like that. "I've been in a room filled with traditional journalists, and I've been reamed," Lending says. "They can't believe it." He doesn't see himself as journalist, calling his work a "hybrid of moviemaking, of storytelling, of journalism." As he explains it, "I believe that a journalist can be very objective by standing back, observing a subject, and yet not capture the truth of the subject's story—because he didn't get inside the subject. You want intimacy, and you want them to reveal some of the deeper stuff. You can't just deal with them as film subjects. You have to be their friend, you have to be a counselor at times."

Lending, who's 46, admits he sometimes gets a little too involved with his subjects. While filming heroin



Tod Lending

addicts in Pilsen ten years ago, he was so intrigued by their rituals that he asked a case manager with a needle exchange if there was a way to experience the feeling of getting high without actually shooting up. The case manager, a recovering addict, offered Lending his dose of methadone. "I was blotto for weeks," he says. "I realized later, what the fuck am I doing taking his dose? This is a guy who's been a heroin addict for 20 years!" He says it took him two months to get back to normal.

Much of Lending's filmmaking career has been spent chronicling the lives of the poor and desperate, most of them African-American. He grew up middle-class, in the second-floor apartment of a three-flat in Evanston just north of Howard Street. He says

Omar and Pete
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the landlord, who lived on the first floor, was black, and as a child he thought that whites paying rent to blacks was the norm. "I really was color-blind to a large extent," he says. "Not by education but by circumstance." His father, an illustrator, gave him a camera for his 12th birthday, and one of the first places he took it was to the streets south of Howard. "I was interested even at that time in hanging out in neighborhoods and taking stills of low-income people," he says.

Lending started his career as a freelance editor in New York, working on a TV show and a feature, then shifted to researching, writing, and producing documentaries in LA. In 1991 he moved back to Chicago and worked on a Harpo Studios documentary

before deciding it was time to start filming projects he chose. Three years later he had his own company, Nomadic Pictures, and had finished an hour-long video for PBS titled *Growin' Up Not a Child*, which examined the lives of children growing up in Chicago's "war zone" neighborhoods. Among the people he interviewed was Dorothy Jackson, who talked about her 14-year-old grandson Terrell Collins. Shortly after the interview Collins was shot to death on his way home from school.

The following year Lending started work on another documentary feature, about the three generations of women in Collins's family. He spent five years following them as they grieved over Terrell's death and

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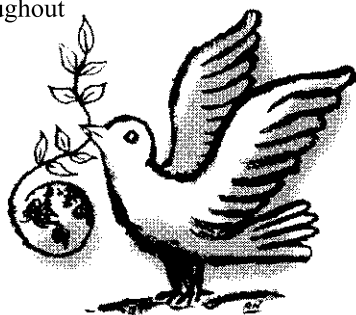


Illustration by Robert Neubecker

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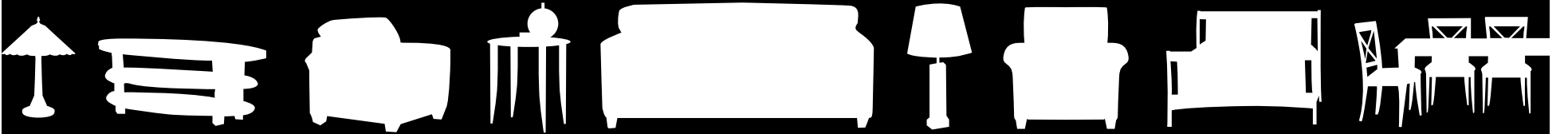
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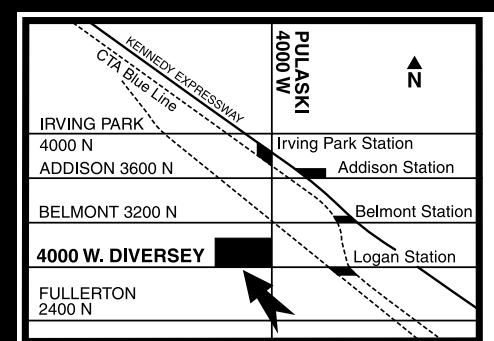
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Our Town

[snip] **"All chefs should have gardens,"** Rick Bayless of Frontera Grill and Topolobampo tells *Organic Gardening* magazine. "My garden gives me a sense of how fragile our relationship to nature is.... When we plant a crop and lose it, it shows us we are not completely in charge." —HH



William "Pete" Duncan, Leon Omar Mason

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struggled with living in the Henry Horner projects. During that time he also helped Terrell's mother, a recovering addict, get into a counseling program. "I was just a bridge," he says, "and once she'd crossed that bridge she didn't ask me again."

The documentary, *Legacy*, was nominated for an Academy Award in 2000, and the Collins women accompanied Lending to the awards ceremony in LA, where they waved to passersby through the sunroof of the limo HBO had paid for and walked up the red carpet. "It was a hoot," says Lending.

He says he'd wanted to include the Collins men's stories in *Legacy*, but "most of them were incarcerated." For his next documentary he decided to find one or two guys who were about to be released from prison and had signed up for a recovery program. "I didn't want to tell a story of guys that were just dumped out on the corner," he says. "I wanted to see what would happen when you gave a repeat offender the best chance to make it."

Lending had hoped to shoot in Chicago, but he says the response from the Illinois Department of Corrections was "lukewarm." The best program for ex-offenders he found was in Maryland, and after interviewing 95 prisoners there, he began shooting video footage of Leon Omar Mason at the Metropolitan Transitional Center in Baltimore in late 2001, a few weeks before he was released. The residential manager at the transitional house where Mason was sent turned out to be William "Pete" Duncan, who'd been friends with Mason since childhood. The two men had remarkably similar histories. Both were 47 years old, both were former drug addicts who'd been in and out of prison for more than 30 years—neither out longer than a year at a time—and both were now Muslims, with shaved heads, skull-caps, and long pointed beards. Duncan had been out of prison for

only ten months when Mason was released. But as the shooting progressed, differences in their character became apparent. Mason quit his job to start two businesses, which soon failed, and he struggled to stay clean; Duncan hung on to his job, taking pride in his ability to help others.

"I had to be really careful how I approached these two guys, the language that I used," says Lending. "They've done so much time, their space has always been invaded, they've been out of control. To get as intimate as I did with Omar took a lot of sensitivity, and it took a lot of patience."

During the years Lending shot *Legacy* he and the Collins family had formed strong ties, but his personal relationship with Mason and Duncan was pretty much a one-way street. Even though it took nearly three years to make *Omar and Pete*, neither man knew that Lending was going through a divorce. He says that's partly because Mason and Duncan lived a thousand miles away, partly because they didn't ask. "I didn't want them to get distracted with stuff that was going on in my life," he says. "They really appreciate the attention and focus that's being put on them. They know I'm there to learn about them, and that feels good to them."

Lending finished shooting this past January. At that point Duncan was still working as a manager and counselor, and Mason was insisting he was going to start over, though people who saw Lending's first cut didn't think he'd make it. Three months later Mason held up a cashier at a Goodwill clothing store with a broken umbrella handle that looked like a gun—the same Goodwill store that had given him his first job out of prison. Because he'd been in prison so many times, he was sentenced to 25 years without parole. The documentary now ends with a statement that he's back in prison.

"It was a blow," says Lending. "I'm very depressed by it." But he says he

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Our Town

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thinks Mason is actually more comfortable in prison than outside. "He knew he does another robbery or anything like that and he's in for a long time. So he made that decision. Pete made a different decision. He's not going back. He really believes that if he goes back he'll die. Omar's a big man in prison. He's got respect, he's a natural leader, he's got followers there—he leads the Muslim community." Lending says he's tried to stay in touch, but Mason hasn't responded. Duncan hasn't heard from Mason either.

Lending says Duncan will be part of an effort by the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign to show the documentary to community groups, government agencies, and former inmates across the country. "He wasn't half as open to me as Omar was," he says, "but now he's so much more engaged with the film." Duncan will even be flying for the first time. "A person from outreach will be going on the plane with him—if somebody stopped him at security he could freak out, he could have flashbacks to being in prison." But Lending says Duncan is committed to going: "It's opening up the world to him." ■

Public Works

Jitterbugging and Gentrification

What StoryCorps learned about Chicago

By Jessica Hopper

Everyone asks Rani Shankar the same question: do she and Nick Yulman sleep in their big, silver StoryCorps trailer, recently parked for two weeks on the lawn of the Field Museum? Yulman answers: "These seats do fold out—I mean, we could sleep here if we had to. But thankfully our hosts are putting us up at a hotel." The two have worked together for the last few years at the StoryCorps home base in New York, but they'd never labored in such close proximity until mid-May, when



The StoryCorps trailer

NICK YULMAN

this project took to the road, its first stop Washington, D.C. After Chicago they'll spend several more weeks together, traveling to Saint Louis and Tuscaloosa. "The first two weeks are sort of like a really long first date," Shankar says. "But then you get over it. Now it's more like summer camp."

This oral-history venture, sponsored in part by NPR, is modeled in spirit and scope on the Works Progress Administration projects of the 1930s. Shankar and Yulman have been working six days a week, ten hours a day, engineering and logging 40-minute recordings of interviews by everyday citizens who believe they know someone with a story to tell—or at least someone whose experience merits space in a library. "Mostly it's people who are related," says Shankar. "Sometimes it's a coworker, or an elder, a mentor." The recorded stories are then turned over to StoryCorps, which prepares them for the Library of Congress archives. In Chicago, they've also been culled for broadcast on WBEZ, which is hosting Shankar and Yulman's visit here.

"The most surprising thing about Chicago is the diversity of the people who've signed up, who've all found out about it from NPR," says Shankar. The 50 spots allotted to the

StoryCorps visit here were claimed much faster than the spots in other cities: people sign up online for interview appointments, and all of them in Chicago were reserved within two hours of a midnight posting on August 5. Shankar and Yulman put in extra hours almost every day, trying to sandwich in exceptional stories and keeping waiting lists in case of last-minute cancellations. Lots of people just showed up at the trailer, hoping to get a spot.

One afternoon, a woman from Schaumburg stopped by to add her name to the list. "I could be here, with my mom, in under two hours," she said as Yulman penciled her name into the margin of the scheduling book. "Right now, we are booked solid," he said. "But if that changes, we'll let you know." Some Tilden High School students on a field trip were outside the trailer, some examining the StoryCorps literature while others gathered around a listening post to hear selected interviews on headphones. After listening, one young man stuck his head in the trailer's open door. "Y'all got a recording studio in here?" he asked, then suggested the story facilitators free up five minutes so he could "lay down a track." ("I wish we could

accommodate everyone," said Yulman.) Inside the trailer Tinamarie Hernandez, 34, was discussing family history with her great-aunt Tillie Gonzalez, 79: Gonzalez talked about everything from how the two World Wars changed her brothers to the generational divide between Sox and Cubs fans. Next up was Lali Watt, 45, of Wilmette and her father, Pranab Lahiri, 73, visiting from Atlanta. They packed their 40 minutes with tales of the family's move from India to Africa and finally America aboard the *SS Laos*. After finishing the recording and requisite paperwork, father and daughter posed for a picture outside the trailer.

After two weeks here, Shankar and Yulman were able to identify the Chicago narratives' dominant theme. "Gentrification," said Yulman. "Loosely, gentrification. A lot of the older people talk about how much all the neighborhoods have been redeveloped and changed. People have also talked a lot about Chicago as a destination. And racism." Shankar added with a laugh, "We've heard quite a few stories about couples that met jitterbugging at the Aragon Ballroom. Oh! And Fluky's! Families from all over the city were built up from dates to Fluky's." ■

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At his request, we do not make his work available online.