

The Bailey Family  
Revisited



National  
Film Board  
of Canada

Office  
national du film  
du Canada

# COURAGE TO CHANGE



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This film explores some of the long-term and immediate causes and effects of poverty by looking at a Canadian family in Montreal. The effects are readily apparent from several perspectives — social, psychological, cultural, and medical. The causes, however, are far more difficult to pinpoint. Is poverty itself a symptom of a deeper malaise? Indeed, how does one define poverty?

Answers to the above questions cannot be found in dry analyses or by poring over statistics. The issue of poverty appears to be a very complex one that calls for some direct experience of the phenomenon before we can reach for understanding.

Through its documentation of the current and former circumstances of Kenneth and Gertrude Bailey and their eleven children, and of their trials and tribulations, *Courage to Change* helps give audiences a personal experience of what it is like to live in poverty. Its purpose is to enable audiences to better understand the issue.

The film documents the daily life of the Baileys as the filmmaker found it in 1984, when, eighteen years after an initial film on their lives, they again agreed to be filmed. The original documentary, *The Things I Cannot Change*, introduced Kenneth and Gertrude Bailey as a couple in their thirties who were struggling to raise a large family on a small income. Now, the Baileys are older and most of their children have left home. What has changed in the intervening years? *Courage to Change* reveals the fate of the Baileys, individually and collectively, since the days of *The Things I Cannot Change*.

As depicted in the 1966 black-and-white hour-long documentary, the Baileys had all the classic characteristics of a "poor family," living as they did below the poverty line in a working-class district of Montreal. Tagged by social workers as a "multi-problem" family, the Baileys exhibited the problems associated with poverty in North American society. Kenneth, the father, was unemployed, his wife Gertrude was pregnant with their tenth child, and the family had to rely on charity for food and clothing.

The film raised numerous questions. Kenneth was clearly a talented cook, so why couldn't he find a decent job? And why, if the family was in such dire straits, were they having another baby? And where did the money come from to pay for the cigarettes both parents endlessly smoked? It was clear the Baileys' problems were not just economic; there were other causes as well. The problem of poverty, as revealed in this film, is complex and multifaceted.

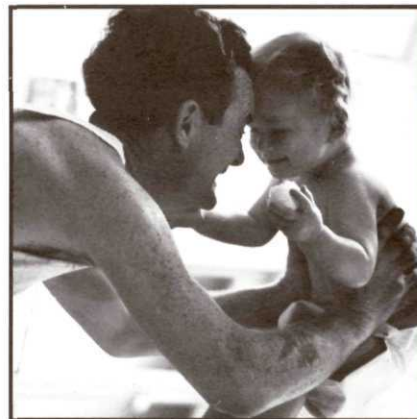
In *The Things I Cannot Change*, Kenneth and Gertrude Bailey had nine children under the age of thirteen and were expecting a tenth. The camera was there to capture the birth of this tenth child. So hopeless did their situation seem back then, that at the end of the film one had to wonder, "How will this family manage to survive until all these children reach maturity?"

*Courage to Change*, the follow-up document on the Baileys, shows the family did indeed survive. The film explores the lives of nine of the thirteen members of the family. A final child, John, was born after the making of *The Things I Cannot Change*. This second film focusses on the parents, Kenneth and Gertrude, and on seven of their eleven children.

Heather Bailey, the baby born before our eyes in the first film, is now eighteen. She is still living at home, as are two of her brothers, Peter and John. Of the older children now out on their own, we meet Susan, the eldest girl, Debbie, who was badly injured in a car accident, and two of the brothers, Kenneth Jr. and Tom. Four of the Bailey children, Richard, Kathy, Theresa and Michael, do not appear in the film.

At first sight, the present circumstances of the family seem greatly improved. But as the film reveals more about the Baileys, we begin to suspect that the earlier deprivation impinges on their current lives. Little formal education and a background of insecurity and anxiety have not helped the older children find work in today's tight job market. The father now earns a respectable living as a cook, but one can still glimpse the effects of previous hard times. Patterns of behavior that were evident in the original film appear to have become more entrenched.

Yet despite these obvious difficulties, each member of the family demonstrates characteristic good humor, wit and charm. Their obvious love for each other, their compassion and acceptance, remind us that despite adversity, the Baileys are remarkable survivors.





## Background to the Films

In 1966, the issue of poverty in the midst of plenty was at the forefront of public attention. In keeping with the mandate of the National Film Board, a decision was made, in conjunction with the Privy Council of the Canadian government, to research and produce a film about the living conditions of Canada's poor.

These were still early days in the documentary style. To try to capture everyday experience "as lived" (cinéma vérité) was a relatively new approach, but one that was enticing both filmmakers and audiences. Tanya Tree, then an aspiring filmmaker, suggested such an approach be applied to the topic of poverty in Canada and was granted funds for research. After several weeks of exploring the issue and possible subjects for the film, she met the Bailey family. In her view, they were excellent candidates to illustrate the complexity of poverty, and they agreed to participate in the project. *The Things I Cannot Change* was soon underway.

Upon completion, this candid documentary was broadcast on public television, where it received considerable attention. It was both praised for its sensitivity and realism, and condemned as an exploitative invasion of privacy. Similarly, the Baileys were perceived alternately as the valiant victims of social injustice or as typical of the lazy poor.

For the filmmaker, such polarized reactions attested to the subjectivity of individual perception and confirmed the complexity of poverty. Eighteen years after this first film, Ms. Tree found the Baileys again, and they agreed to another documentary. Tanya Tree's hope was that this second film would shed further light on poverty and answer some of her own questions.

## About the Filmmaker

For Tanya Tree, the Bailey's situation reflects the paradoxes one finds in most aspects of life. Their lifestyle and circumstances seem not to yield to rational analysis. In her view, the two films about the Baileys provide neither the whole story on this family in particular nor on poverty in general. Each film offers only one tiny slice of life, one fragment of the whole picture.

Like any other effort to capture and communicate something about "truth," cinéma vérité has its limitations. It is still the perspective of one individual — a perspective bound as much

by camera angles and editing selections as by the choices of what to shoot and when. As well, there still remains the problem of how the subject, agreeable as he or she might be, is affected by being a film subject. Behind both these considerations is the deeper, more ambiguous question of exactly how filmmaker and subject influence each other in their relationship to the camera.

At best, one might say, each film can provide only limited evidence on which to base conclusions about poverty. As such, each film challenges viewers to discover their own definitions of poverty and their own relationship to the materially poor.

For the filmmaker personally, meeting the Baileys and making *The Things I Cannot Change* had a marked effect. As an only child from a comfortable, fairly affluent background, Tree was surprised and perplexed by the way the Baileys managed to survive in what were, for her, profoundly insecure circumstances. Their cheerful stoicism and apparent confidence in the future could not readily find a slot in her beliefs about life. The encounter with the Baileys challenged her habitual perceptions and initiated deeper self-questioning.

As *Courage to Change*, the second film on the Baileys, winds its route through production processes and is prepared for audience use, twenty years have gone by for the filmmaker as well as for the film subjects. In these years, her initial cultural shock of working with the Baileys has had time to settle into a different understanding of the forces that shape human life. She has had to re-examine the relationship of the individual to society, and the individual's capability as well as responsibility for shaping the future.

These are not simple questions. They call upon ways of knowing that appear to be beyond the scientific paradigm that continues to inform perceptions and modes of being in western societies. For the filmmaker in 1987, the question of the things she can or cannot change remains central.

She is uncertain where the quest for answers will lead her. Her main hope about her films is that reflection about the fate of the Bailey family, as glimpsed through the cinéma vérité documentaries, may help others to have a wider, more inclusive and more compassionate view of those seemingly chained to poverty. In her view, perhaps some adequate answer of how to help the poor can come only when those who sincerely wish to be helpers recognize and accept their own processes of "being," and through such experience, attain the wisdom that can make the difference.

## Audiences

### 1. EDUCATION

High School (grades 10-13), CEGEP, University. Subject Areas: Social Studies; Science/Social Work; Values Education; Health Studies; Film Studies; Professional and Teacher Training; Community-based Adult Education.

### 2. HEALTH AND SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALS

This film is a powerful catalyst for discussion among professionals. As well, it is an effective tool for use with various clients: for example, drug-abusers and their families; juvenile and adult delinquents; and clients with other social/emotional disorders. Many clients can identify with the social setting and the challenges faced by the Bailey family and thus gain insights and more perspective on their own problems.

### 3. COMMUNITY GROUPS

These films serve as excellent discussion-starters on diverse topics: family planning; alcoholism and drug addiction; education; the effectiveness of social agencies; social and individual responsibility for change; parenting; the effect of environment on individuals; the issue of poverty; ways to help the poor, especially children of some poor; the notion of equal opportunity, etc. Because the films touch on such subjects in an integrated fashion, they are ideal for stimulating individual and group analyses of pressing social issues.

## Suggestions for Use

The following discussion topics are divided into two broad categories: Attitudes/Belief Systems and Factual Subject Areas. Teachers/animations may wish to show the film(s) immediately, then select pertinent foci for discussion. Or, they may prefer to initiate some discussion before screening the film(s). Asking participants to share their views on poverty, then introducing a few of the attitudinal statements for their consideration is one effective way to deepen involvement with the issue and with the films. More of the attitudinal statements and some of the factual topics can then be discussed after the screening. As well, the factual suggestions provide core areas for researching and writing essays or oral presentations.

### 1. ATTITUDES/BELIEF SYSTEMS

Many people have both conscious and unconscious attitudes towards poverty that may be



challenged or influenced by the films. The following statements express typical attitudes. They can serve as effective catalysts for discussion both before and after seeing the films.

- The poor are victims of an unjust social system.
- People get what they deserve, and deserve what they get.
- The children of low-income families have as much chance as anyone to be successful.
- Children of low-income families may as well not try, because they can never be successful at anything.
- The sins of the parents are visited on the children.
- People on low incomes should have small families.
- People live in poverty because they are too lazy to work.
- If people are poor, it's their own fault.

## 2. FACTUAL SUBJECT AREAS

Stemming from issues touched upon in the films, these topics lend themselves to research, writing and oral presentations, as well as to discussion.

- A comparison of low-cost Canadian housing for the poor in the sixties and in the eighties.
- The effectiveness of social agencies in meeting the needs of the poor, including some consideration of how social agencies might be more effective.
- What are we not understanding about the poor and about how they might best be approached and helped?
- What is the "culture of poverty"? Provide examples: spending habits; work and study habits; goals and expectations; degree of awareness of opportunities, etc.
- Does a lack of material wealth and goods necessarily signify "poverty"? How is poverty usually defined? What other definitions of the word are there?
- The role of alcohol in "poverty cultures," and in society in general.
- The role played by domestic violence: its causes, its effects.
- The question of mental health and its relationship to poverty issues.
- The role of education in the "culture of poverty."
- What have you learned, from seeing the films: i) about "the poor"; ii) about yourself and your perceptions?
- The problem of "objectivity" in research (myth of the "objective observer"; the relationship of observer to research subject, etc.).

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## Courage to Change

Produced and distributed by the  
 National Film Board of Canada

Color

Screening time: 54 minutes 17 seconds

16 mm: 106C 0186 051

3/4": 116C 0186 051

VHS: 113C 0186 051

Beta: 114C 0186 051

## The Things I Cannot Change

Produced and distributed by the  
 National Film Board of Canada

B & W

Screening time: 58 minutes 6 seconds

16 mm: 106B 0166 071

3/4": 116B 0166 071

VHS: 113B 0166 071

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