



Presents

# TOUGH LOVE

a documentary film by Stephanie Wang-Breal



**US TELEVISION BROADCAST: POV on PBS Spring 2015**

**TRT: 83 minutes**



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[https://www.dropbox.com/sh/sqi9ra3bytsxmi0/OWl0my\\_72N](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/sqi9ra3bytsxmi0/OWl0my_72N)

**Trailer:**

<http://youtu.be/mvduSZ5oJ-o>

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## LOG LINE

Two parents navigate the red tape of America's child welfare system as they fight to regain custody of their children.

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

Offering a rare look at the inner workings of the American child welfare system, *Tough Love* chronicles the lives of two parents—one in Seattle and one in New York City—as each fights to be reunited with children taken out of their custody. Through intimate, verité footage of both families, we witness first-hand the complex and daunting bureaucracy of America's family courts. Moreover, we come to understand the powerful role poverty and prejudice play in keeping parents and children apart—and the challenges parents must overcome in order to put their families back together.

## LONG SYNOPSIS

*Tough Love* follows Patrick Brown, a single, white father in Seattle, and Hasna “Hannah” Siddique, a newly married Bangladeshi mother of two in New York City. Both Patrick and Hannah have been charged with neglecting their children and are now fighting to get their kids out of the child welfare system and back home. Through exclusive access to their courtroom appearances, their visits with social workers, and their time spent with family, *Tough Love* chronicles Patrick and Hannah's separate journeys through the child welfare system. In so doing, it uncovers the emotional and cultural challenges both must overcome as they seek to put their families back together.

We first meet Patrick in Seattle's Family Treatment Court, a specialized program that helps parents with a history of substance abuse reunite with their children. His four-year-old daughter, Natalya, has been living with a loving Italian foster family after being removed from his care. After 15 months in the Family Treatment Courts, Patrick is sober and holds a steady landscaping job, but worries about money and relapse still haunt him. The judge reminds Patrick that he needs to build strong support systems before he can get his daughter back.

As the film unfolds, we watch as Patrick gets closer to getting Natalya home. But then he stumbles—gambling away his rent money and drinking a glass of wine—after an emotional 4<sup>th</sup> of July holiday without his daughter. His case now takes a huge step backwards and the courts and administrators involved in his case begin to question his recovery and ability to parent his child in a safe environment. Among other requirements for reunification with Natalya, Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous meetings are added to Patrick's list of responsibilities. And staffing meetings at the Family Treatment Courts reveal that the Judge might terminate Patrick's parental rights. With the system stacked against him, Patrick wonders whether he has what it takes to be a father, or whether Natalya would be better off being adopted by her foster family.

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Meanwhile, across the country in New York City, we meet a seven-month pregnant Hannah and her new husband, Philly. At first, they seem like any happy, young couple. But we soon learn that two years earlier, Hannah's two children, from a previous relationship with an abusive ex-boyfriend, were removed from her care after an anonymous caller informed the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) that she left them for nights at a time with Hannah's Bangladeshi mother. We learn that even as she expects a newborn in the coming months, Hannah is still fighting to be reunited with her older children. Having made little progress thus far, she's enlisted the help of the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a support group for child welfare-involved families.

It's at a CWOP meeting that Hannah and Philly learn a devastating child-welfare fact: the safety of their unborn child will also be under investigation because Hannah has an open case with ACS. They also learn that their current housing—with Philly's mother—is a liability. If they don't move, ACS may not only deny her custody of her older kids, but take her new baby as well. With no other options, Hannah and Philly follow the advice of their parent advocates and apply for a family homeless shelter.

While waiting for a shelter spot, Hannah gives birth to a healthy baby girl, Mia. Then, just days after Baby Mia is born, the city housing authorities deny her and Philly a spot in the family shelter. Both the couple and their parent advocates at CWOP fear that ACS may not be able to see past Hannah's housing troubles, despite the progress she has made in building a stable home for her growing family.

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As both Hannah's and Patrick's case inches its way towards dismissal, audiences experience the human stories behind the acronyms and bureaucracy so often associated with the child welfare system. They perceive the remarkable discretion and power judges have to define what makes a parent a parent—and a family a family. They witness the oft-overlooked and unappreciated role that social workers, lawyers and parent advocates play as child welfare cases drag on. Most powerfully, they feel the strength and poignancy of Hannah and Patrick's love for their children—and the incredible odds against which they fight in order to get them back.

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## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011, I took the 6 train uptown to the Lehman Village public-housing complex in East Harlem, New York. I went to observe a weekly parent support group meeting at the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP). I had spent the six months prior meeting and interviewing foster parents, foster care agencies and social workers, but throughout my research I found one voice elusive: the birth parents.

Inside the small, crowded room I met parents representing every borough and ethnicity of New York City. I met a mother from Guatemala who needed housing for herself and her kids so they could escape her abusive boyfriend. A single mother who suffered from PTSD after two tours in Iraq told the Guatemalan mother about a family shelter in Queens with a Spanish-speaking social worker on-site who could help her. Thanks to CWOP, this veteran was able to get her daughter home and she was now at this meeting to offer support to parents going through the system.

Parents flocked to CWOP because they felt safe there: safe to tell their stories without judgment, and safe to ask questions about a system in which they felt powerless. I was surprised and touched by these parent's stories and their determination to turn their lives around so that they could get their kids home. But it seemed, even after years of compliance and changes, many of these parents felt trapped. Here they were fighting the biggest battle of their lives: getting their kids home. Yet they were fighting without the proper tools and information.

A few weeks later, I met Hasna "Hannah" Siddique. Everyone noticed Hannah the minute she walked into the meeting. Her six-month pregnant belly, glowing skin and radiant smile reminded everyone of the excitement a mother carries when she is expecting a new baby. Hannah was frustrated by the lack of movement on her two-year case. Her ex-boyfriend's verbal and physical abuse brought her and her two older kids, AJ and Nia, into the system. When the other parents told her that her newborn was also at risk of entering the system, Hannah's smile disintegrated into tears. Her helplessness was palpable. Hannah's story showed the vexations of the birth parent, a side of adoption and child welfare that was rarely seen in the

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mainstream media. If I could document her attempt to keep her newborn and get her other two kids back, maybe others would start to see another side of these families.

I soon met Hannah's husband Philly, and was immediately taken by their world. Here was this young, mixed race couple who were so in love and excited about their future together, yet real world facts and demands constantly challenged their relationship. One minute, I'd see them dancing with the kids while making dinner; the next minute I'd find them hunched over Philly's paycheck, adding up how many more hours he needed to work in order for them to qualify for low-income housing.

It was clear that Philly loved Hannah and her kids from her ex-boyfriend, but it was also evident that the case scared him. His seven-day-work-week gave him a valid excuse to escape Hannah's court dates and conferences. He knew she felt helpless there, but he felt powerless in giving her the necessary support.

Hannah desperately wanted to move her life forward, but her child welfare case kept reminding her of all her past mistakes. The more time I spent with Hannah, the more I could see how her childhood filled with shelters and abuse forced her to grow up too fast. She never had a chance to enjoy childhood, an experience she so badly wanted to give her kids.

I was able to develop relationships with Hannah's ACS caseworker, lawyer and ex-boyfriend. However, no matter how hard I tried to persuade them, they did not feel compelled to participate in this project. I knew no matter how observational and experiential this story felt, if it did not include other observations of the system it would feel one-sided. That's when I decided to seek out other jurisdictions to see if I could document not just another parent's case, but also the court hearings that ultimately decided the case. Through CWOP, I discovered another parent advocate-training model in Seattle's child welfare system. I decided to fly out and meet the local child welfare players.

In Seattle, I observed Judge Patricia Clark's courtroom and that's when I first met Patrick. Patrick was a single father whose past included drugs, incarceration and working for the mafia. This colorful background, combined with his recovery and determination to get his three-year old daughter home, made him stand out to me as well as many Family Treatment Court (FTC) workers. In court, it was clear that Patrick was nervous but he was not entirely uncomfortable. He chatted and, at times, flirted with Judge Clark. I never heard such laughter in the courtroom before. Judge Clark made him feel at ease, like she was rooting for him to get things straight so he could "one day be out there with his daughter."

Patrick liked and hated the camera. He liked having it around when he thought about all the good things it could do to help other families going through this situation, but when it caught him trying to manage his packed work, treatment, court and daddy responsibilities, it made him feel embarrassed that he wasn't doing "good" enough. The only time he forgot the camera was when he was with Natalya. He adored his daughter. She took him to places he never knew existed. Together, they were a good team. He—and the foster parents—knew that his survival rested on her existence.

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At times Patrick's FTC team loved him and other times they felt like "he just didn't get it." No matter what mistakes he made, though, his FTC team never let him go. They held meetings and wraparounds to discuss the self-confidence issues that prevented him from moving forward. It was incredible to see the level of treatment the court provided Patrick and his daughter, and I strongly believe that this ultimately gave Patrick the second chance he so badly wanted.

I hope *Tough Love* gives audiences a glimpse of the lives inside the child welfare system, the lives of the families and workers who spend countless days navigating this complex bureaucracy. Because at the end of the day, it is a system made of people. People who are faced with complex issues like housing, welfare, domestic violence, and substance abuse. People who have to overcome unimaginable obstacles to have a family again. Too often, adoption is seen as the only option for children in foster care. Through Hannah, Philly, and Patrick's stories, I hope to show audiences that these children have parents who love them and are willing to do whatever it takes to get them home.

## **FILMMAKERS**

### **Stephanie Wang-Breal-DIRECTOR/PRODUCER**

Stephanie has been producing and directing commercials, television shows and documentaries for the past 10 years. Most recently, Stephanie directed the award-winning feature length documentary, *Wo Ai Ni Mommy (I Love You, Mommy)*. The film was nominated for an Emmy®, and was the recipient of three Grand Jury Best Documentary Awards at the AFI/ Discovery Silverdocs Film Festival, the Asian American International Film Festival and the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival, as well as a 2011 CINE Special Jury Award. The film had its national television broadcast in 2010 on the award-winning PBS series P.O.V. Stephanie has also recently directed pieces for Apple, Goldman Sachs, as well as a television episode for Nickelodeon's NickMom. Stephanie currently resides in Brooklyn, New York with her husband and four-year old son.

### **Carrie Weprin-PRODUCER**

Carrie is a television, film and web video producer. She's currently working at The New York Times in their video department overseeing third party video on the website. Carrie was the Director of Digital Content at Bedrocket Media Ventures where she coordinated various digital video initiatives including the development and launch of four YouTube partner channels, and assisted in the production of the award winning independent film, *Sleepwalk With Me*. Carrie started as a television producer developing and producing content for various networks including CBS, AETN and MTV.

### **Ursula Liang-CO-PRODUCER**

Ursula is a journalist who has told stories in a wide range of media. A former staff editor at T: The New York Times Style Magazine and writer/reporter at ESPN The Magazine, Liang was a host of the radio program Asia Pacific Forum on WBAI, associate producer for the Emmy-nominated documentary, *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*, producer for the Emmy-nominated Asian American TV show *Stir*, and sports editor for the Asian-American magazine, Hyphen. She is currently finishing her first feature

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documentary, *9-Man*--a story about a streetball sport in Chinatown--and recently produced for Fuel's *UFC Countdown*, and FX's *UFC Primetime*. Liang grew up in Newton, MA and lives in The Bronx, NY

### **Nadia Hallgren-CINEMATOGRAPHER**

Nadia is a leading cinematographer and documentary filmmaker from the Bronx, New York. Her camera credits include Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the 2008 Sundance Grand Jury prize winner and Academy Award-nominated *Trouble the Water*. Nadia has also directed two films; *Sanza-Hanza*, a short-documentary profiling teenage train-surfers in South Africa that was later acquired by PBS, and *Love Lockdown*, which premiered at SXSW and won the prize for best short film at HBO's Urbanworld film festival.

### **Nathan Miller-CINEMATOGRAPHER**

Based out of Seattle, WA, Nate has traveled across the US and abroad, acting as Cinematographer on music videos, commercials and shorts. In 2009, he shot the short film *Aphids*, which was an Official Selection at that year's Indie-Memphis Film Festival. In 2011, Nate acted as the Second Unit Director of Photography on the feature film *The Off Hours*, an Official Selection of the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, and later that year the short *Howard From Ohio*, which screened at the Seattle International Film Festival. With a couple shorts still in post, Nate is gearing up to lens a web series and several more shorts in 2013.

### **Colin Nusbaum-EDITOR**

Colin is the co-editor and cinematographer of Caveh Zahedi's *The Sheik And I*, which premiered at the 2012 SXSW Film Festival, and earned a review from Film Comment calling Sheik the festival's top film. The film has gone on to screen at San Francisco International Film Festival, IFF Boston, Florida International Film Festival, and others. Colin has also worked with award-winning directors Richard Hankin, Alex and Tanya Meillier, Michael Moore, Bob Richman, and Liz Garbus on documentary projects for HBO Documentaries, Overture Films, A&E Television, and PBS. Colin is based in Brooklyn, New York.

### **Mary Manhardt-EDITOR**

Mary is a documentary film editor and consultant, specializing in verite. Her work has won awards at major festivals, including Sundance, Hot Docs, SXSW, SilverDocs, Vancouver, Tribeca and IDFA, and shown on HBO, PBS, MTV, ABC, A&E and AMC. Among her credits: *The Farm*, *The Execution of Wanda Jean*, *girlhood*, *Farmingville*, *Street Fight*, *American Teen*, *Racing Dreams*, *Mystic Ball*, *Monica & David*, *Pelotero*, *Wham! Bam! Islam!*, *A Son's Sacrifice*, *Bronx Princess*, *Camp Victory*, *Afghanistan*, *American Promise*, and *Medora*. Mary won an Emmy award in 1999 for Picture Editing for *The Farm*. More recently, *American Promise* won a Special Jury Prize at Sundance, 2013, and was an official entry in the 2013 New York Film Festival. She is currently editing *Dreaming in Color*.

### **Tyler Strickland-COMPOSER**

Tyler is a composer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist based in Los Angeles. In 2006, he began his career as a touring multi-instrumentalist with a Capitol Records artist. Within six months he found himself touring the world from New York to Tokyo,

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and beyond. Always having had an extremely visual grasp on life and music, he eventually found himself putting the touring life aside to embark on his career as a composer for film. Tyler's scores have since accompanied both narrative and documentary films at the most prestigious film festivals world-wide, been heard on international broadcast television, and in countless ads for major global brands. Tyler's greatest ambition in life is to continue to create engaging music for meaningful motion pictures.

## **CREDITS**

### **Director**

Stephanie Wang-Breal

### **Executive Producers**

Simon Kilmurry, Cynthia Lopez,  
Sally Jo Fifer

### **Producers**

Stephanie Wang-Breal, Carrie Weprin

### **Co-Producer**

Ursula Liang

### **Cinematographers**

Nadia Hallgren, Nathan Miller

### **Editors**

Colin Nusbaum, Mary Manhardt

### **Composer**

Tyler Strickland

### **Produced by**

eyeWANG Pictures

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