

# Los Angeles Times

## From Soaps to Gritty Reality of Poverty

**Former daytime TV producer Gerard Straub traded the high life for a more fulfilling one, making documentaries to help the world's needy.**

By Wendy Thermos  
Times Staff Writer

February 20, 2005

Gerard Straub knows what it's like to be perched on the pinnacle of success. He also knows what it's like to beg.

Straub once made \$10,000 a week as a soap opera producer in Los Angeles and New York, enjoying a life of fancy cars and tailored clothes. Now he makes \$300 a week and shops at thrift stores.

The riches-to-rags journey was of his own doing, spurred by a troubling realization that the world's wealth was surrounded by destitution and suffering.

Today, instead of telling fictional stories of daytime-drama characters, he uses the power of film to document the plight of the world's poor in hopes of prodding the more fortunate to lend a hand.

"It's raw. It's real," said the 57-year-old North Hollywood resident. "We see the tsunami and say, 'Why does God allow it?' Well, why do *we* allow it?"

Straub has traveled to the world's worst slums to produce documentaries on the despair and squalid conditions of millions of impoverished people. The films are used by aid organizations, such as Union Rescue Mission in Los Angeles, to raise funds through screenings at houses of worship, on college campuses and on television.

His 1997 film, "We Have a Table for Four Ready," airs annually on many PBS stations at Thanksgiving and has generated more than \$250,000 in donations for the Philadelphia soup kitchen it focuses on.

The soap-king-turned-filmmaker has traveled to 39 cities in 11 nations, including India, Brazil, the Philippines, Kenya and Mexico, delving into the misery of people coping with no sanitation, rampant disease, mental illness and cardboard shelters or none at all.

His films are full of disturbing images: thousands of homeless people picking through mountains of garbage for castoffs to sell to junk shops, people horribly disfigured by disease, the indignities of having no privacy or bathroom facilities.

But the documentaries also depict heartwarming family celebrations, people offering their few scraps of sustenance to strangers and joyful faces undaunted by hopeless conditions.

"There's a tremendous love of life in these places, a resiliency, a will to overcome," said Straub.

In all, he has made eight documentaries on the world's paupers. "We Have a Table for Four Ready," the first, tells the story of a soup kitchen run by Franciscan friars in Philadelphia's Kensington section.

Straub said that when donations began rolling in from the broadcast, "then I knew. I saw the power of film to change the lives of poor people."

Other films he has produced include "Endless Exodus," on the crushing poverty of Mexican and Salvadoran immigrants to the United States; "Rescue Me," about the indigents who inhabit Los Angeles' skid row; and "Embracing the Leper," on the crippling disease's hidden but startling toll in Manaus, Brazil.

Much of the lighting, music, editing and other technical work is donated by his contacts in the entertainment field. But "I'm constantly begging for funds to do these films," he said. He uses the website of the nonprofit organization he set up to sponsor his work, the San Damiano Foundation, to sell copies of the films and appeal for funds.

"I fervently believe film can touch hearts and minds," he said. "I want people to think about the poor and get them to do something," even if it's donating a few dollars or giving an hour a week to a shelter.

"People are so overextended today," he said, "but they find four hours a day to watch mindless TV shows."

Straub is all too familiar with that mind-set.

He got a temporary job at CBS headquarters in New York as a teenager and worked his way up through the ranks of the broadcast industry. By the early 1980s he was associate producer of "General Hospital" during its heady Luke-and-Laura era. Later he was the executive producer of "The Doctors" and supervising producer of another daytime serial, "Capitol."

"I clearly remember I was sitting one day in my office overlooking the ice-skating rink at Rockefeller Center, and I was watching the credits on 'The Doctors' and saw my name. I thought, 'Who would watch this?' " he said.

"We had to do everything for a ratings point. I knew it wasn't fulfilling me. I wanted to think about more serious things in life."

Intertwined with his fast-paced life was a bumpy relationship with religion. Raised a Catholic, he had long had doubts about his faith. His experiences in the late 1970s as the producer of Pat Robertson's then-fledgling "700 Club" led him to write a book, "Salvation for Sale," published in 1986. It detailed his contempt for televangelists, whom he saw as peddling falsehoods.

He left network TV in 1987 to take a series of consulting and freelance jobs in the entertainment business while he penned an indictment of organized religion, a novel titled "Dear Kate" that was published in 1992.

But it wasn't until 1995 that he found the answer to his quest for a meaningful life, and ironically it sprang from religion.

"I was in an empty church in Rome, and I opened up a prayer book at random. It talked about a soul searching for God," he said. Even today he can't explain it, but he felt inspired to change himself "from an atheist into a pilgrim" who would help the forsaken.

Though his work has spiritual overtones, Straub says the films are meant to speak to atheists and people of all faiths. "We must fight the feeling that one person cannot make a difference," he said. "The message is that this is one big human family and we have to take care of each other."