



# Troop 1500

## Girl Scouts Beyond Bars



*a film by Ellen Spiro and Karen Bernstein*



A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

Women Make Movies | 462 Broadway, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor | New York, NY 10013  
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## Synopsis

**Their mothers may be convicted thieves, murderers and drug dealers, but the girls of Troop 1500 want to be doctors, social workers and marine biologists.**

With meetings once a month at Hilltop Prison in Gatesville, Texas, this innovative Girl Scout program brings daughters together with their inmate mothers, offering them a chance to rebuild their broken relationships. Intimately involved with the troop for several years, the directors took their cameras far beyond meetings to explore the painful context of broken families. Powerful insight comes from interviews shot by the girls themselves, which reveal their conflicted feelings of anger and joy, abandonment and intimacy—as well as the deep influence their mothers still have on the girls.

An estimated 1.5 million children have incarcerated parents and 90 percent of female inmates are single parents. Their daughters are six times more likely to land in the juvenile justice system. TROOP 1500 poignantly reveals how an inspired yet controversial effort by the more than 90-year old Girl Scouts organization is working to help these at-risk young girls deal with their unique circumstances and break the cycle of crime within families.

## Festivals

*For the most updated list, visit [www.wmm.com](http://www.wmm.com).*

- MoMA Documentary Fortnight
- South By Southwest Film Festival
- Northwest Film Center, Portland, OR
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
- Tampere Film Festival, Finland
- Maine Women and Girls Film Festival
- Baltimore Museum of Art
- Smithsonian Institution
- Sarasota Film Festival
- Mill Valley Film Festival
- Florida Film Festival
- GirlFest, Hawaii
- Savannah Film Festival



## Credits

2005 · 68 minutes · Color

Director

**Ellen Spiro**

Producer

**Karen Bernstein**

Camera

**Ellen Spiro, Deborah Eve Lewis**

Editing

**Lillian Benson, Ellen Spiro, Jenn Garrison**

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## Filmmaker Biographies

**Ellen Spiro** is an internationally recognized filmmaker whose documentaries have been broadcast around the world. Her awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, two Rockefeller Fellowships, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, First Prize in the USA Film Festival, Golden Gate Award, Prized Pieces Award from the National Black Programming Consortium, Paul Clere Humanitarian Award of Excellence and others.



Spiro's unconventional approach to documentary is fueled by a history working in experimental film, art and activist video. She produces, directs, shoots and edits her own work. Known as a pioneer in small format video technology, Spiro made her first documentary for \$564 while studying at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in New York City. Dubbed "the little video that could," *Diana's Hair Ego* was the first documentary shot on 8mm consumer video equipment to be shown on television in the U.S.

She was awarded funding from ITVS in their first year of operation for *Greetings From Out Here*, a queer travelogue through the Deep South. *Greetings* became the first ITVS project to be broadcast by maverick satellite feed on PBS, won first prize in the USA Film Festival and an invitation to the Sundance Film Festival. Gene Siskel said of her work *Roam Sweet Home* "there's a wild sense of discovery at every turn... visually striking and deeply moving." In the *Hollywood Reporter* Marilyn Moss calls *Roam Sweet Home* "part poetry and part mobile experience... a captivating tale that rediscovers America and life in the not-so-fast lane." Spiro continues to push small format video technology to its limits in her current works in progress.

**Karen Bernstein** has spent the last 20 years in documentary production, most notably as Series Producer for PBS' acclaimed arts and culture biography series, AMERICAN MASTERS, where she received a Primetime Emmy and a Grammy award for documentaries on Ella Fitzgerald and Lou Reed, respectively. She recently finished producing and directing *Are The Kids Alright?* for PBS in addition to programming for the Sundance Channel, HBO, and Gallery HD.



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## Quotes

**“Heartwarming and heartrending, the film shines a light on an ignored segment of society and considers how America can prevent the children of the incarcerated from feeling punished themselves.”**

“O”, *The Oprah Magazine*

**Inspiring and compelling, TROOP 1500 steers clear of sentimentality and drives home the magnitude of difficulty of breaking the cycle of crime.**

*The Chicago Reader*

**[A] surprisingly sprightly doc...[the] pic's calm evenhandedness incorporates video-within-video experimentation and deliciously campy interpolated snippets of vintage Girl Scout newsreels.**

Ronnie Scheib, *Variety*

**"Extraordinary... Don't Miss It."**

Editorial, *Austin-American Statesman*

**"Filmmakers Ellen Spiro and Karen Bernstein spent two years with the coltish girls before they flipped on their cameras to record these heartbreaking reunions — complicated combustions of emotion, sharing, life lessons and pizza."**

Chris Garcia. *Austin-American Statesman*

**"Spiro's Troop 1500 gets under the skin."**

Belinda Acosta, *Austin Chronicle*

**[An] unorthodox, sweet and transforming story."**

*Orlando Sentinel*

**"It's nice to know there are people like Julia Cuba out there trying to make things better for these young girls who deserve more...and that there are people like Ellen Spiro willing to take a chance filming their stories. "**

- *themoviechicks.com*



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## THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Working to break the cycle of crime within families and make these dreams come true are the Lone Star Girl Scout Council, The University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work, the Crime Prevention Institute and the YWCA.

“Current estimates indicate that 1.3 to 1.5 million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent,” said Dr. Darlene Grant, associate professor of social work and associate dean of graduate studies at the university. “These vulnerable children face unique difficulties and their growing numbers and special needs demand attention.”

Austin’s Enterprising Girl Scouts Beyond Bars Troop 1500 was established in 1998 using a Maryland venture as a model for a visiting program for women in prison and their daughters. There are more than 30 such programs in the country and only two in Texas. Troop 1500 will be the subject of a PBS documentary by Ellen Spiro of the College of Communication to air next year.

“Despite the fact that they are in prison, mothers are still important influences in these girls’ lives,” said Grant, who has been evaluator of Troop 1500 since its inception. “But bonds have been broken, and the program works to rebuild the relationships.

“I think the biggest fear for most mothers in prison is that their child will also end up there.” There are 45 girls, ranging in age from 6 to 17, registered in Troop 1500. When mothers get out of prison, their girls become “alumni” and most still attend select meetings acting as big sisters, said Julia Cuba, troop leader and coordinator. Now a graduate student in the School of Social Work, Cuba was hired by the Girl Scouts to help start the Beyond Bars program in Austin.

According to research conducted by Grant, the number of female prison inmates has skyrocketed since 1980 and 80 percent of women in prison have daughters. Ninety percent of these women are single parents and two-thirds of women in prison in the U.S. are women of color. Their daughters are six times more likely to land in the juvenile justice system than children whose parents have not been in jail, Grant said.

These at-risk adolescent girls have identity and self-esteem issues as well as the need to work through anger they may feel at being abandoned. Giving women in prison the chance to spend time with their daughters also helps the mothers. The warden at Gatesville Hilltop Prison (90 miles northeast of Austin) reports that the behavior of the women involved in the program has improved.

The girls of local Troop 1500 sell cookies in February and occasionally go on camp outs, but this is where similarities to other Girl Scout troops end.

The troop meets three times a month. A licensed therapist from the YWCA conducts group therapy at a meeting held at the School of Social Work the second Wednesday of the month.

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The girls' big excursion together is a once-a-month trip to Gatesville to visit their mothers in prison. The mothers and daughters share a meal, do each other's nails, sometimes have a facial and generally catch up. Then, they get down to the real business at hand: team building, literacy curriculum, decision-making curriculum, communication-building skills work, life skills activities and group therapy.

"There's a lot of hugging, kissing and tears," said Grant. "The girls crave the love of a mother that other family members might berate. "I worry about how society vilifies these women and especially how that affects the girls," she said.

Since the drop-out rate for adolescents with incarcerated parents is high, the program also teaches the girls about the importance of staying in school and also how to avoid early pregnancy and lessons in substance abuse prevention. "And social skills—like not yelling at potential Girl Scout cookie customers!" said Grant.

"We want to make sure these girls get all the resources they need to stay out of prison themselves," said Cuba. "Prison wrecks your life. It taints records, closes doors to career building and acts as a substitute for a much needed mental health system in Texas."

Statistics for Troop 1500 are encouraging: 96 percent of the 45 girls have not been pregnant before the age of 18; 93 percent have not dropped out of school and 100 percent have not been arrested.

The Beyond Bars program also provides support to guardians (grandmothers and other relatives) who are caring for the daughters. And, it helps prepare and support mothers in making the difficult transition from prison to the outside world—on that day she is given \$50 and a set of street clothes and released.

Troop 1500 caught the attention of Spiro, an award-winning film producer from the university, who is directing the PBS documentary. Her films, including "Diana's Hair Ego," "Roam Sweet Home" and "Atomic Ed and the Black Hole," have been broadcast nationally and around the world. Spiro is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and she has won two Rockefeller Fellowships for her films. Karen Bernstein, who won a national prime time Emmy Award for "Ella Fitzgerald—Something to Live For," is producing the documentary.

The girls are not only the subjects of the film, "Troop 1500—Girl Scouts Beyond Bars," but also work as crew members. The documentary is funded by the Texas Council on the Humanities and PBS and is scheduled to air in 2005. Grant and Cuba are writing a companion book for the film.

"I began my involvement with the troop as a volunteer," said Spiro. She then started conducting media workshops with the girls—training them to use cameras and editing systems "so they could understand, in a hands-on way, the power of media representation.

"They are now empowered by the process and are currently taking active roles in the production as cinematographers and interviewers," said Spiro. The girls, in fact, are conducting interviews with their own mothers, which has been a transforming experience, Spiro added. "Rather than being the mere subject of the camera's gaze," she said, "they are using the cameras in ways that give them the power to ask really difficult questions of their mothers.

"The mothers, on the other hand, have been amazingly receptive to the process and seem to want the opportunity to share honest and serious concerns with their daughters."

In a promotional trailer for the documentary, the girls ask their mothers questions like: "Why did you start selling drugs again after you had spent time in jail?" "Do you think you'll be better when



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you get out?” “What did you think the first night you were in prison?” “Were you around drugs when you were little?”

Comments by mothers are equally poignant. “She was six years old when I was locked up, and it probably turned her world up side down,” said one woman, who is serving a life sentence for euthanasia.

“It doesn’t mean you can’t be a mother or parent because you are locked behind bars,” said another woman serving time for organized crime activities. “I think the only way you stop being a parent is when you are dead and six feet under.”

The only problem with this program is that there are not more of them, said Spiro. “But resources are slim and we hope that our documentary will change that and help it grow.

“Girls are not only learning how to build relationships with their moms, but also learning how their mothers made bad choices and how they can make different choices.”

Most of the stories are heart wrenching. One girl’s mother has been in prison five different times. Another 14-year-old girl’s grandmother became ill and went into a coma. The girl had to move in with an abusive cousin—who would not give the girl her medication—and she reacted with severe depression and anger, Cuba said.

“It didn’t help that when we went to visit the mother at Gatesville, she turned to her daughter and said, ‘I got to get pregnant again so I can have me a pretty one!’

“The girl cried the whole way home and tried to commit suicide several times that year,” Cuba said. She desperately needs the support of a consistent, loving family and friend network, Cuba added. “She is slowly building that at a new home with a different cousin,” she said, adding that troop leaders and mentors have increased the amount of attention they are giving the girl, and she has been given leadership roles within the troop to build her self-esteem. “Her grades are good, she has lost weight from eating better and exercising, and she reads a book a week,” said Cuba. “Her education will save her life.”

In addition to therapy at the Wednesday evening meetings, the troop is often treated to guest lecturers and themed parties. On one occasion, the girls heard from a self-defense instructor and at a recent meeting, local guest artist Benné Rockett from IDEA Gallery helped the girls make masks. These will be part of an exhibit at the gallery, at 701 Tillery St., on May 8.

Members of the Austin Junior League became volunteers for the troop this year and attend meetings and go on the Gatesville trips. “They are also acting as mentors, and I think the volunteers and the girls have learned a lot from one another about people from different walks of life,” said Cuba, adding that many social work students also volunteer to work with the girls.

In addition to the prison visit, the girls take other field trips once a month—sometimes back to the university where they interact with college students. “We challenge the girls to meet new students and find out what they are studying, what classes they like and dislike and what they plan to do with their degrees,” Cuba said. “These kinds of interactions familiarize the girls with higher education opportunities and let them see the diverse group of people who are striving for careers and why.

“The hope is the more they are exposed to higher learning, the more natural the idea will be in their lives.”

Nancy Neff



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## The Bars that Bind

An estimated 1.5 to 2 million children in the United States have a parent in prison. The trauma associated with having an incarcerated parent has been well-documented: depression, aggression, poor academic performance, truancy and a greater likelihood than children whose parents are not incarcerated of ending up in prison themselves. Add to these outcomes the stigma the circumstance carries, the jolting impact of disrupted care-giving and the trauma of “losing” a parent and the need for public intervention becomes clear.

### Girl Scouts: Serving Girls in Different Circumstances

As an organization committed to the positive development of all girls, regardless of their circumstances, Girl Scouts has, for the past 13 years, sponsored **Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB)**, a parent-child prison visitation program that seeks to preserve mutually affirming relationships between incarcerated mothers and their daughters. What began in 1992 with one Girl Scout council in Maryland now involves more than 40 councils in the following states:

Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

While lessening the impact of parental separation is the primary goal of GSBB, the program also aims to foster the positive personal and social development of girls and their moms through three core components:

- Mother/daughter troop meetings at the correctional facility
- Girl-only troop meetings and council-wide activities
- In-prison enrichment activities for the incarcerated moms

### More Facts about GSBB

- GSBB began in 1992 with a partnership between the Girl Scout Council of Central Maryland and the National Institute of Justice.
- GSBB currently serves approximately 900 girls between the ages of 5 and 17.
- GSBB program activities and components include:
  - **Literacy programs**
  - **Book clubs**
  - Transitioning programs for released mothers
  - **Counseling for girl participants**
  - **Counseling support for girls' caretakers**
  - **Drug treatment counseling for mothers**
  - Community service projects involving girls
  - Referrals to community services for girls and caretakers
- Many mothers who “graduate” from the program continue their participation in Girl Scouting as adult volunteers.
- In the past few years, close to \$5 million in federal and private grants have been secured to support local Girl Scout councils in their efforts to enhance and expand their GSBB programs.

Current programmatic emphases include:

- The provision of grants to councils for the expansion of existing and the establishment of new GSBB programs.
- The provision of technical assistance designed to foster programmatic innovation among GSBB councils.
- The evaluation of longer-term project impact.

For more information about Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, contact Trina Brooks, Project Manager, GSBB, at 1-800-223-0624.







March 15, 2005

## Troop 1500: Girl Scouts Behind Bars

A Women Make Movies release of an ITVS presentation of a Mobilus Media production. Produced by Karen Bernstein. Executive producer, Sally Jo Fifer. Directed by Ellen Spiro.

By **RONNIE SCHEIB**

**Ellen Spiro's surprisingly sprightly docu concerns a Texas Girl Scout troop whose mandate is "to strengthen the bond between girls and their incarcerated mothers in order to break the cycle of crime." While empathetic to their subjects' plight (pic follows five women and seven girls), and in tune with the social experiment the troop represents (the girls are regularly brought to prison in structured encounters), filmmakers remain aware of the ironies of juxtaposing jail time and brownie points. Pic's calm evenhandedness incorporates video-within-video experimentation and deliciously campy interpolated snippets of vintage Girl Scout newsreels. Cable should be a shoo-in.**

Helmer Spiro alternates footage of mothers and daughters reciting the Girl Scout oath, fingers upraised, with women reciting the reasons they are in jail -- armed robbery, drug dealing, aggravated assault, euthanasia. Thus the director establishes a tension between hope and disillusionment that runs all through the film. Is deepening the bond between daughter and jailbird mother simply setting up the kids for disappointment? Does it arouse unrealistic expectations for the mothers that will only add to the pressures of staying straight? Both the filmmakers and the program use confrontation as a means of working out the negativity and emotional confusion between parent and child -- the girls are given "girlcams" with which to "interview" their mothers, the cameras forcing a level of raw honesty that makes evasion impossible. With a social worker and a psychiatrist as troop leaders, forays into the woods become "trust hikes" with the unblindfolded leading the blindfolded, and in-prison visits include the shared activity of making masks to uncover uncomfortable truths.

Spiro resists the prevalent docu tendency to turn the image over to her subjects -- sometimes the video frame of the "girlcam" forms just a small detail within the larger picture. At other moments, startling fisheye close-ups of mothers are followed by genetically similar mug-shots of their kids. Chryons superimposed under the shots of inmates, spelling out the number of months left until possible parole, reveal that most of the repeat offenders will soon go home. Meanwhile, an empathetic young nurse who practiced euthanasia on two of her suffering nursing home patients will languish in jail for at least 229 more months of her 50-year sentence.

Though Spiro never criticizes the scouting institution and tacitly supports its attempts to respond to a changing world, excerpts from archival Girl Scout promos such as "Our Date With the Future" featuring Celeste Holm showcase a peculiarly Aryan idealism that still partly resonates as a vision of what is normal.

Camera (color, DV), Spiro; editors, Lillian Benson, Jenn Garrison, Kyle Henry; sound, Karen Bernstein, Darcee Douglas; associate producer, Juliet Dervin. Reviewed at Museum of Modern Art Documentary Fortnight, New York, Feb. 13, 2005. (Also in South by Southwest Film Festival.) Running time: 66 MIN.



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# Austin American-Statesman

## Incarcerated – and a Girl Scout mom

EDITORIAL BOARD  
Friday, March 11, 2005

You might not expect a film about Girl Scouts to debut at the edgy South by Southwest Film Festival that begins today. But then you might not expect that the Girl Scouts have gone to prison — so to speak.

Most of us know Girl Scouts as the peppy youngsters who stand on neighborhood street corners selling cookies to raise money for their programs. We buy their cookies, not only because they are tasty, but also because we support the values and goals of the nation's largest private club for girls. The Girl Scouts are about helping young girls become successful women. Its programs help girls stay in school, build self-esteem and connect with positive role models.

At 4 p.m. Saturday, Central Texans will have an opportunity to see another side of Girl Scouts. The film, "Troop 1500," peeks inside the lives of girls whose mothers are incarcerated at a Texas prison. This extraordinary documentary, created by award-winning filmmakers Ellen Spiro and Karen Bernstein, premieres at the Paramount Theater. It will be shown on other dates (check [Austin360.com/sxsw](http://Austin360.com/sxsw) for complete listings) throughout the film festival that ends March 19.

The 65-minute film focuses on the Lone Star Council's Beyond Bars program and the girls in Troop 1500.

Filmmakers volunteered for two years with the troop before shooting any footage. The film includes emotional interviews written and filmed by the girls whose moms are locked up: "Why did you do drugs after already spending time in prison?" a girl asks her mother. Another daughter confronts her mom about how it makes her feel each time she returns to prison, while another copes with having a mother sent to prison for murder.

Troop 1500 serves girls ages 6 to 17 from four Central Texas counties — Hays, Caldwell, Travis and Williamson. Their mothers are housed at the Hilltop Unit in Gatesville. Aside from the usual character-building activities, the troop makes regular visits to the prison so girls can build stronger bonds with their mothers.

At the screening, the filmmakers will give a brief talk before the movie. After the screening, those in attendance will have a chance to speak with the seven girls in the film and two mothers who have been released from prison. The film and discussion touch on a growing problem as more women are imprisoned. Don't miss it.



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## SXSW '05 Interview: 'Troop 1500' Director Ellen Spiro by Scott Weinberg

### The 'Troop 1500' Pitch:

Their mothers may be convicted thieves, murderers, and drug dealers, but the girls of Troop 1500 want to be doctors, social workers, and marine biologists. Meeting once a month at Hilltop Prison in Gatesville, Texas, this innovative Girl Scout program brings daughters together with their inmate mothers, offering them a chance to rebuild their broken relationships.



"A girl scout troop whose moms are incarcerated."

*Will this be your first time at SXSW? Any other film festival experience?*

I showed my doc **Atomic Ed & The Black Hole** at SXSW a few years ago. It won Best Short Documentary.

*When you were 14 years old, if someone asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up, what would your answer have been?*

An adventure photographer.

*How did you get started in filmmaking? Through photography.*

*How have things changed for you since your film was accepted into the festival?*

Nothing has changed except my hair is messier and my dog needs a walk.

*When you were shooting the film, did you have SXSW (or film festivals in general) in mind?*

No, I was just trying to make my film.

*How did you get your film started? How did you go from script to finished product?*

I met a girl scout troop leader named Julia Cuba whose troop of girls all had moms in jail...I don't have scripts, just transcripts.

*What's the one glaring lesson you learned while making this film?*

You never finish a film, you just have to end it.

*When you were in pre-production, did you find yourself watching other great movies in preparation?*

No, I absorb a lot of cultural products: plays, books, art, and occasionally film.

*If a studio said 'we love this, we love you, you can remake anything in our back catalogue for \$40m' – what film, if any, would you want to remake?*

**The Passion of Joan of Arc**



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# Orlando Sentinel

April 8-14, 2005

## 'Troop 1500'

★★★

Girl Scouts are a traditional part of the mother-daughter experience. But how's a girl supposed to learn about life, camping and cookies when Mom's in prison?

Troop 1500 is about a special Girl Scout troop whose members are the daughters of drug addicts, thugs, thieves and even murderers.

Ellen Spiro's blunt and photographically flat but moving documentary follows these Texas preteens as their social worker tries to give them both a normal Scouting experience, and to break the pattern of abuse, violence and terrible choices that their mothers and sometimes their mothers' mothers made before them.

The girls go on group visits to the prisons where their mothers are incarcerated and videotape interviews with them, interviews that ask questions so tough Mike Wallace would be proud. And they struggle to develop relationships with women who weren't thinking about their little girls when they took drugs or made whatever mistake they did that put them in prison.

Spiro's film is touching without being preachy, and it gives one a whole new appreciation for an organization that most of us think about only at cookie time.

Screening at: 1 p.m. Sunday at Regal Winter Park Village, 4:45 p.m. Thursday at Erosian Theater.



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May 2005

## ***Troop 1500***

by Leslie Halpern

In an hour-long documentary about incarcerated felons and their young daughters who come to visit, you might think that heroes and villains would be clearly delineated. But in *Troop 1500*, filmmakers Ellen Spiro and Karen Bernstein reveal many shades of gray by presenting the good and bad sides of all the characters involved with the controversial Girl Scout troop.

The Austin, Texas-based Mobilus Media production and Women Make Movies release delves into the lives of four convicts at Hilltop Prison in Gatesville, Texas, and their five daughters in Girl Scout Troop 1500. Facilitated by the warden, a social worker, and the troop leader, the girls come inside the prison for monthly visits designed to help heal the wounds caused by their mothers' crimes, which include drug violations, assault with a deadly weapon, and murder. These crimes and the subsequent incarceration not only tear families apart, but perpetuate a cycle of criminal behavior within these families.

"We wanted to be honest and fair in the depiction of what happened," says Bernstein, who produced *Troop 1500*. "Relationships are explored between the girls and their mothers, between the girls and their troop leader, and between the girls themselves. With 88 hours of footage, there were many ways to play it. The film could have been devoted completely to the girls' eye view or focus on just one family."

Ultimately, she and Spiro, who directed and did camera work along with Deborah Eve Lewis, decided on a broader story. "This is not a puff piece on the program," Bernstein says. "We show how prison has a three-dimensional impact on these women."

The filmmakers trained the girls to use camera equipment for documenting personal interviews with their mothers. They ask difficult questions such as "Why are you in prison?" and "What was your first night in prison like?" The mothers tearfully describe their crimes and admit to making "bad decisions."

The film follows the girls on their trips to Hilltop Prison, accompanies them to the Lone Star Council where they admire merit badges and buy Girl Scout uniforms, visits them in their homes, and tags along on various camping adventures and cookie sales. Like the program itself, which receives subsidized funding for the girls, the film was produced with a grant from ITVS.

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Spiro and Bernstein did volunteer work with the troop for two years, and then spent an additional two and a half years filming after they received the grant money. The last shoot was in December 2004. Since then, *Troop 1500* had a sneak preview at New York MoMA's Documentary Fortnight, followed by its premiere at South by Southwest, then its Southeast premiere at the Florida Film Festival.

Bernstein says she became involved with the Girl Scout program after meeting the people involved in this particular group, and learning some of the staggering statistics, including that an estimated 1.5 million children have incarcerated parents and 90 percent of female inmates are single mothers.

"When we first met the troop leader and learned about this group, it sparked an interest in me," she says. "This came at a time when prison docs were getting lots of funding, and we were lucky that the Texas Department of Criminal Justice proved to be very cooperative in giving us access."

Although she describes the prison library where the Girl Scouts meet as a "clean, neat, almost sweet" environment, she says the crew had a guard with them the entire time they were on prison grounds. Once they made it past the various gates and met certain restrictions, they were granted access to shoot most of their scenes.

Although the girls in Troop 1500 are still adolescents, Bernstein says having a mother in prison makes them grow up quickly. "You go into it with a certain notion of what these girls are like and what their lives must be like," she says. "But you'd probably be surprised."

Bernstein has spent the last 15 years in documentary production, most notably as series producer for PBS' series *American Masters*, and as producer-director of *Are The Kids Alright?* Spiro has created other documentaries, including *Diana's Hair Ego*, *Greetings From Out Here*, *Roam Sweet Home*, and *Atomic Ed & the Black Hole*.

Even after spending more than four years observing and documenting Troop 1500, Bernstein says she (like so many others) has mixed emotions about the controversial program that makes young girls feel comfortable visiting their mothers on prison grounds.

"Hilltop Prison is very different from some of the other prison units we visited, which were really scary places where you would never want to bring a child," she says. "Even so, I'm still not sure that girls should be brought into any prison to see their mothers under these conditions."

