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May 19, 1994

Senator Claiborne Pell
Subcommittee on Education, Arts & the Humanities
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-6306

Dear Senator Pell,

Thank you for your kind letter congratulating me on "Defending Our Lives" winning the Oscar for Best Short Documentary. I want to express my sincere thanks to you for recognizing the film, and my work, on the Senate floor.

As a longtime Rhode Islander, I have always been proud to have been represented by you in the Senate. Your work - especially on education - has been inspiring to me. And I am, by the way, one of the countless people who received a college education with the help of a Pell grant.

Winning the Academy Award was especially gratifying for everyone who worked on the film because we all felt that domestic violence had reached startling proportions in this country, and that this crisis demanded attention from lawmakers, educators, and the general public. We are pleased that so many state legislators and members of Congress have seen the film, along with members of the law enforcement, legal, and judicial communities - and I do believe that progress is finally being made on this issue.

We had hoped to make this film available to everyone by broadcasting it over our public airwaves. PBS, however, has refused to air it. We are very disturbed by this, especially since the reasons that PBS cited for rejecting the film seem to reflect a misunderstanding of the film's intent and of the filmmakers' integrity, as well as a disregard for public television's important role as a forum for public education and discourse on social issues. Since you chair the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts & the Humanities, I thought you might be interested in hearing PBS's policy regarding this issue:

In April, the producers submitted the film to PBS's programming department for national broadcast consideration. PBS wrote on April 27 informing us that "Defending Our Lives" had been rejected for national broadcast. Their reason for rejecting the film represents a direct attack on the rights of association and free speech of every filmmaker in America.

PBS cited one of the producers, Stacey Kabat, as having a "direct self-interest in the content of the program." They maintained that as a member of a human rights group focusing on domestic violence (Battered Women Fighting Back!), Stacey's bias and self-interest in the subject disqualified the film from public television broadcast. When it was
pointed out that Stacey Kabat neither funded, profited from, nor controlled the final product, PBS refused to reconsider, even though "self-interest" is legally interpreted as financial. We also explained that Battered Women Fighting Back!, now a non-profit human rights organization, was merely a prison support group consisting of nine women when we made the film. But PBS claimed that this was a firm policy not subject to review.

We feel that we should point out that this "firm" policy has been applied inconsistently throughout PBS's programming history. A few examples:

- PBS broadcast "James Reston: The Man Millions Read," funded and produced in association with Reston's paper, the New York Times. The director/producer was Susan Dryfoos, member of the Sulzberger family, owners of the Times. The Times' review of the documentary notes that it treated Reston with "admiration and respect."

- PBS aired a multi-part series, "The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil" which was funded by Paine Webber, a major investor in oil exploration and production. The series was based on a book by Daniel Yergin, who is a consultant to major oil companies and OPEC governments. He is also featured as the film's major analyst.

- PBS broadcast "Living Against the Odds," a special on risk assessment. The film contended that "we have to stop pointing the finger at industry for every environmental hazard." It was funded by Chevron Oil.

To us, the important point is not that PBS bends its own rules when they see fit, but that they have decided to apply the rule when it involves a human rights issue that affects millions of women every day in this country. We feel that PBS owes the public an explanation. Doesn't PBS have a mandate to program educational, socially relevant programming that we cannot find on commercial television?

We also feel that PBS owes Stacey Kabat an explanation of their assault on her motives and participation in this film. She has labored for many years, most of those without pay, on the issue of domestic violence. She received no money for her work on the film, nor did her organization. Her experience and her humanitarian efforts on behalf of victims of violence, some of whom became the subjects of our film, made "Defending Our Lives" possible. To accuse her of "direct self-interest" is an outrage.

As award-winning filmmakers who have produced social issue documentaries for the past twenty years, we consider PBS's explanation a direct insult to our professional reputation and to our journalistic and artistic integrity. But more importantly, the decision saddens us because it means that this film about one of the most devastating human rights crises in this country will not be available to everyone on our free public airwaves.

If you have any suggestions for us - who deals with such issues in the Senate, what our political recourse is, etc. - we would certainly appreciate it. Again, thanks so much for your kind words and recognition of my work. Good luck with your continued fine work in the Senate.

Sincerely,

Alice Maurice, Associate Producer
"Defending Our Lives"