

Siskel/Jacobs Productions
presents

THE ROAD UP

a film by Jon Siskel and Greg Jacobs



USA // Documentary // English // 93 mins // 16:9 // Stereo Mix
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LOGLINE

Driven by an impassioned mentor, four participants in a Chicago job-training program search for hope, and a pathway out of poverty. [21 words]

SHORT SYNOPSIS

The Road Up follows four participants in Cara, a Chicago job-training program, as they struggle to find the path from rock bottom to stable employment. Throughout, they are guided, goaded, and challenged by their impassioned mentor, Mr. Jesse, whose own complicated past compels him to help others find hope in the face of poverty, addiction, homelessness, and trauma. Taken together, their stories create a powerful mosaic of the struggles that millions of Americans face every day in a precarious and unforgiving economy—the daunting and often interconnected challenges that prevent so many from joining the economic mainstream. Because when everything behind you is wreckage, and everything in front is an obstacle, how do you find the road up? [118 words]

FULL SYNOPSIS

The Road Up begins in January 2016, in a large conference room at Cara, a highly regarded job-training program in the city's South Loop. Cara provides services and opportunities for adults who face barriers to employment. Their goal is to place their "students" in jobs they're expected to hold for at least a year. But first, every Cara participant is required to attend a month-long "boot camp" called Transformations. And that's where Mr. Jesse comes in.

Equal parts preacher, teacher, comedian, and coach, Jesse Teverbaugh developed and runs the Transformations class. Jesse treats every four-week session like a boxer entering the ring, exhausting himself in an effort to spark some hope in the hearts of his students, a sense of possibility that most have long since lost. For some, he becomes a surrogate father, building them up, but also calling them out. While profoundly sensitive to the pain and trauma they've endured, he has little patience for excuses, a "tough love" approach firmly grounded in the reality of the jobs he's trying to prepare them for. He knows they have no safety net, no room for error; one misstep—showing up late for work, mouthing off to a supervisor—can get them fired, reigniting a cycle that can land them back in a shelter, a trap house, or a prison cell.

Jesse's lessons form the narrative spine of *The Road Up*. Some are designed to unleash long-suppressed emotions—the "mirror exercise", for example, where students are forced to face their own reflections in an effort to confront an often crippling lack of self-worth; or the "love exercise", which demands that each student reconnect with someone in their lives in order to look them in their eyes, hold their face in their hands, and tell them "I love you." Other lessons, like a darkly humorous recitation of real-life termination letters, or a tense, uncomfortable confrontation meant to illustrate "the power of the pause", are cautionary tales. What connects all of them is Jesse's insistence that it's not "job skills", traditionally defined, that will transform his students' lives, but rather the fundamentally human ingredients that are all too often ignored in programs like this one: connection, community, self-control, love, and most importantly, hope.

Jesse's classroom lessons are reflected in the lives of our four main subjects, whose journeys during and after Transformations are woven throughout the film. They include:

- **Kristen**, 32, whose youthful promise was derailed by a nine-year heroin addiction. Perceptive and disarmingly funny, Kristen hopes to get her criminal record sealed so she can more easily find work and finally move out of transitional housing.
- **Alisa**, 38, whose Trinidadian roots show in her quick smile and the colorful flower she often keeps in her hair. Alisa is coping with homelessness and addiction, along with crushing debt, which is keeping her from reuniting with her two preschool-age daughters, whom she hasn't seen since the youngest was six months old. Yet she retains an irrepressible spirit, and ultimately finds work as a patient care nurse at a local hospital.
- **Clarence**, 45, whose stoic demeanor masks a kind and sensitive heart. Years of incarceration and drug use have taken their toll on Clarence's relationships with his family and children, and despite Jesse's efforts to draw him out, he struggles to communicate the emotional burden he is carrying. In the end, his inability to reach out proves to be his undoing, as Jesse is forced to dismiss him from the program after he repeatedly arrives minutes late to work.
- **Tamala**, 50, whose decades of addiction, homelessness, and unemployment have failed to extinguish her confident presence. When we meet Tamala, she's about to start a new job, and is proudly saying goodbye to St. Martin de Porres, the South Side shelter where she's been living for the past year. But through Jesse, we learn that her newfound freedom quickly got the best of her, and following an argument with a supervisor, she was fired from her job, and relapsed soon after.

The narrative of *The Road Up* culminates on the last day of Transformations, when Jesse tells his own story, finally revealing to the class the shocking truth of how *he* came to be at Cara. A decade earlier, he explains, after discovering that his longtime girlfriend had been cheating on him for years, he fell into an abyss of drinking and drugs, barricading himself in his house for two years until his family finally intervened. Far from being a former businessman or CEO, as many of the students have speculated, Jesse was *them*—rock bottom, hopeless, helpless—until one day, while he was in treatment, representatives from Cara showed up to put on a seminar. “The point of it is,” he tells them, “I ain't no different than you. If I can, you can.”

The film then ends with a cautiously hopeful—and powerfully emotional—montage, as we see Alisa tearfully reunite with her children; Tamala resurface, having found a stable foothold at the Salvation Army; and Kristen move into an apartment of her own.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

When we began pre-production on *The Road Up* back in 2015, our goal seemed fairly straightforward: to capture the inner workings of a successful job training program, while upending stereotypes about a population too easily—and too often—ignored. Five years in, that goal still guides the project, but as inevitably happens, our deepening engagement with both our subjects and the issues they face has added scope and nuance to what we hope to communicate.

Even before COVID-19, a staggering number of American workers were trapped in a kind of economic purgatory, unable to get—or keep—a job that could help them escape poverty. Now, the pandemic has left millions more unemployed, exposing the precariousness of the workforce, and magnifying the urgency of job training as an issue. But what can be done? On the one hand, these challenges are the result of huge, systemic forces: racial segregation, mass incarceration, epidemics of addiction, technological change, inequality, and a frayed social safety net. On the other hand, none of these problems will be solved by tomorrow morning, and we all have to get through the day.

Like the issue itself, Cara exists right at the intersection of the personal and the structural. For the population it serves, the obstacles are so varied and hard to overcome that the formula most traditional job training programs follow—acquire some skills, find a job, and everything else will fall into place—simply doesn't work. Often, it's easier to return to the familiar chaos of life in the streets, or succumb to the omnipresent beast of addiction, than to adjust to the constraints and stresses of the workplace.

That's why Cara's model is so timely and compelling. It essentially flips the script on the traditional formula, making the case that the first step on the road up isn't finding employment, it's finding hope, connection, and community. What some dismiss as “soft skills,” Cara calls “harder skills”: conflict resolution, impulse control, even the ability to express love and accept it in return. To Cara, these are the essential skills that give their students the resilience they need to persist, and ultimately to thrive. By explicitly and emphatically stressing the “love” in “tough love,” Cara's model pointedly critiques how we approach the entire issue of job training in America, essentially asking the question, “what if we've had it wrong all along?”

By capturing the emotion and complexity of our characters' struggles, we hope *The Road Up* will spur audiences to question their own assumptions about the population Cara serves, and what can and should be done to help them. In many ways, we have come to see *The Road Up* as the third installment of a kind of accidental trilogy, an ongoing story we didn't even realize we were telling. While our previous documentary features—[Louder Than a Bomb](#) and [No Small Matter](#)—seem to have little in common with this one in terms of style and subject matter, they all deal in one form or another with innovative ways to address urgent issues of poverty, inequality of opportunity, and isolation. And yet the theme that truly connects them is about as old as it gets—the transformative power of connection, community, and love.

—Jon Siskel and Greg Jacobs, Directors

CARA BY THE NUMBERS

- Since 1991, Cara has placed more than 6500 people in over 10,000 jobs.
- The average hourly wage for those placements is \$14.35
- Cara's placements have a 71%, one-year, same-firm retention rate, more than 20 points higher than the national average
- 78% of Cara graduates live in permanent housing after a year on the job (versus 38% upon inception)
- ROI: Cara returns \$5.97 back to society for every dollar invested
- Educational attainment of Cara students: 66% high school diploma; 21% GED; 13% less than 12 grade
- Conviction history of Cara students: 55% none; 36% misdemeanor only; 9% felony
- Race/ethnicity of Cara students: 81% black/African-American; 9% white; 7% Hispanic; 3% other



FIVE QUESTIONS WITH Jesse Teverbaugh, Cara Director of Student and Alumni Affairs

How do you describe Cara?

Cara helps men and women affected by poverty (and often the interrelated challenges of recovery, domestic violence, episodic homelessness and incarceration) to get and keep good jobs, and more importantly rebuild hope, self-esteem, and opportunity for themselves and their families in the process. We not only address financial poverty but relational poverty. It is a comprehensive human boot camp. A physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual boot camp.

How do you explain what you do at Cara?

I would describe myself as a traffic cop. I find out where a person wants to go and I point them in the direction on how to get there. Just like a mechanic would not let their customer get on the highway with a faulty tire or mechanical malfunction, I do the same for the participant. I give them a tune-up that will prepare them for the journey they're about to embark on. I help them identify what is malfunctioning and then I give them the tools to self-correct. I give them the key to their lock to hang around their necks so they will always have it when they need it.

Why is Transformations such an important part of the Cara process?

Because we realize that there is much more to a human being and the human struggle than one's financial being. We don't believe that just getting someone a job is going to put them on the path to success all by itself. There are other factors that must be addressed if one is going to truly transform. It does not automatically last and must be nurtured and practiced every day.

What was your reaction to seeing the film the first time?

One of the more humbling experiences of my life. It allowed me to be the participant as well as seeing myself through the lens of a participant. It added another layer of validation to the work that we do at Cara.

What do you want audiences to take away from the film, about Cara and/or the people it serves?

There but for the grace of GOD go you. If you don't see yourself somewhere in this documentary then you are living in a fantasy world and are part of the problem. These are our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles...Hurt is hurt and pain is pain and we are all human beings that sometime in our lives are going to need help and support. Everybody needs a Cara!!!

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH Maria Kim, Cara President & CEO

What is the vision of Cara?

Our vision is to fuel a courageous national movement to eradicate relational and financial poverty. Here's how we see it: relational poverty is essentially the isolation we feel as people when our bench isn't deep, when we don't have folks in our corner to help us bounce back when life throws us a curveball. Financial poverty is often an outcome of that; and our belief at Cara is that if we do not solve for both, we may not effectively solve for either. This film is inviting us to struggle with, dig deep, and learn from that interdependence – the injustice, misfortunes, and missteps that might bring someone to the trappings of poverty and the relationships and connections that can help someone navigate their way out.

How has COVID-19 affected Cara and the people it serves?

COVID-19 has affected the people we have the honor to serve in ways often too numerous to mention, whether in the debilitating effects of social isolation, the disproportionate impact of COVID in our neighborhoods resulting in loss of family and friends, the compounded and collective grief we experience through this parallel pandemic of racial injustice, the decimation of jobs in sectors that have historically employed our population, or the fragility of housing to ensure a safe roof overhead. The irony of this moment is that our safety and security as a society rely wholeheartedly on the leadership of our essential workers; and yet our systems and structures do not treat them as essential.

Everyone at Cara was very clear from the start that the film should not be an advertisement for the organization—what was your reaction to seeing the film for the first time?

I was emotionally wrecked because I could feel the beauty and sometimes the beauty in the ugly of this work. We are in the business of people – people who are indeed on the road up from jump, and also people who we let down, who let themselves down, and everything in between. That's what the work of poverty alleviation is. It is beautiful, and one person at a time, unpredictable, and hopeful. It is also messy, heartbreaking, and systemically challenging too. We are one piece of a journey both our participants and ourselves go through, and so our job is to hold two truths at once: edge the system to be more inclusive and help employers see the pathway to how, and cultivate talent within our communities and lift them up for the world to see. That may not happen on first try, but our odds of success over time – having tried – go exponentially up.

What impact do you hope the film will have?

I think this film has the opportunity to center us—and by us, I mean society as a whole—in the humanity in others. I want people to see themselves in the characters and the characters in themselves. I want viewers to recognize the systems, circumstances, and situations that can break our heart or break our spirit and then I want them to channel that empathy into a deepened understanding of the inequities that create poverty, the humanity that can perpetuate

it, and the opportunities we each have – within our profession or within our person – to be an active and activated part of the solution.

What can businesspeople and policymakers do to begin to address the issues the film raises?

Business leaders and policymakers should think about the irony in the moment that we stand today – the fact that we are clean, safe, and healthy because we stand on the shoulders of essential workers, yet those same essential workers live in communities most extraordinarily affected by poverty. In this incredible inflection point our country finds itself in today where we have a singular opportunity to radically and inclusively change the trajectory of our nation, imagine what could be possible if we galvanize around the notion that people – no matter their race, identity, or zip code – are always essential. If we center our conversations in that way, can we collectively mobilize from grief to action? Can we examine our practices that may inadvertently exclude community talent from our firms, and can we interrogate our systems that may hold opportunity at bay for our most vulnerable? What this time has shown us is that there is a national will; what this film can do is to help to catalyze the way.

THE TEAM

GREG JACOBS AND JON SISKEL, Co-Directors

Greg Jacobs and Jon Siskel are the co-founders of Chicago-based Siskel/Jacobs Productions.

Most recently, Greg and Jon co-directed (with Danny Alpert) [*No Small Matter*](#), the first feature documentary to explore the power and potential impact of early childhood education. Completed in late 2018, *No Small Matter* has already begun moving the needle on the issue at a national scale, through over 1200 screenings and an ambitious impact campaign. The film currently has a perfect 100% rating on RottenTomatoes.com.

Prior to *No Small Matter*, Greg and Jon produced and directed the documentary feature *Louder Than a Bomb*, which follows four Chicago-area high school poetry teams as they prepare to compete in the world's largest youth slam. The winner of 17 festival prizes (including the Audience Award and a Special Jury Award at the 2010 Chicago International Film Festival), *Louder Than a Bomb* was hailed as "one of the 10 best documentaries of 2011" by Roger Ebert, and received a perfect 100% rating on RottenTomatoes.com. In January of 2012, *Louder Than a Bomb* had its world television premiere on the Oprah Winfrey Network, as an official selection of the "OWN Documentary Club". The film was also selected for the U.S. State Department's 2011 American Documentary Showcase, and received the 2011 Humanitas Prize for documentaries.

In 2008, SJP produced the landmark History Channel special *102 Minutes That Changed America*, which reconstructs—in real time—the events of 9/11 in New York City, using only sound and video from that morning. More than five million viewers tuned in to the premiere, making it the most-watched special in the network's history, and the program has now been seen by over forty million viewers worldwide. *102 Minutes* won three Primetime Emmys, including Outstanding Nonfiction Special, as well as the Most Innovative Program Award at the 2009 History Makers International Summit, a CINE Masters Series Award, a Silver Telly, and a FOCAL International Award. It was also named the Best Nonfiction TV Episode of 2008 by iTunes.

SJP produced six episodes of the "Witness" series for the National Geographic Channel, including *Witness: Katrina*, which won the 2011 News and Documentary Emmy for Outstanding Historical Programming. Jon and Greg also wrote, directed and produced *Head On*, a two-hour special about the obsessive subculture of "team demolition derby" in Joliet, Illinois, which aired on Discovery in December 2006.

In 2016, SJP produced the documentary *Unexpected Justice: The Rise of John Paul Stevens*, which premiered on WTTW in Chicago and aired on over 200 PBS stations around the country. Jon and Greg also served as the U.S. Executive Producers of *1916: The Irish Rebellion*, a three-part documentary series narrated by Liam Neeson that commemorated the centennial of the Easter Rising. The series, which aired around the world in 2016, won the American Public Television Programming Excellence Award, along with the Irish Film and Television Academy's award for best documentary series. In 2018, SJP served as Executive Producers on *Grace*, an award-winning documentary short directed by Rachel Pikelny.

Greg is a 2016-2017 New America Fellow and the author of *Getting Around Brown*, a history of school desegregation in his hometown of Columbus, Ohio. Jon is the former board president of Free Spirit Media, a Chicago youth media organization.

RACHEL PIKELNY, Producer

Rachel Pikelny is an award-winning filmmaker and producer recently named to DOC NYC's "40 Under 40" list. While serving as the Director of Production at SJP, Rachel produced *The Road Up*, *No Small Matter*, *Unexpected Justice*, and several other projects, including her own directorial debut, *Grace*, a short film about a Chicago-area breast cancer survivor and the battle that begins when everyone else thinks the war is already won. Prior to her stint at SJP, Rachel was affiliated with Chicago's Kartemquin Films, where she produced *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* and associate produced *A Good Man*, about the choreographer Bill T. Jones. Most recently, Rachel produced the feature documentary *Represent*, with Kartemquin. She currently co-chairs the Documentary Producers Alliance.

STEPHAN MAZUREK, Director of Photographer

Chicago-based cinematographer Stephan Mazurek has served as director of photography on several SJP projects, including *Head On* for Discovery, *Louder Than a Bomb*, and *The Road Up*. As a cameraman, he has worked on a variety of films, including *Love Is a Verb*, *Love Gilda*, *The War and Peace of Tim O'Brien*, and *No Small Matter*, as well as shows and documentaries for PBS, ESPN, National Geographic Channel, History, and A&E. An accomplished playwright, theater director, and production designer, Stephan's work has been seen on stages around the world, including the Public Theatre, the Goodman Theatre, and Steppenwolf.

JOHN FARBROTHER, Editor

John Farbrother is a Chicago-based editor whose work has aired on Discovery, History, National Geographic, and CNBC. John recently co-edited the Emmy-winning and Academy Award-nominated PBS Frontline documentary *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail*. The film received the 2017 Critics' Choice Award for Best Political Documentary, was nominated for a Peabody Award, and was selected by the National Board of Review as one of the Top Five Documentaries of 2017. John's first feature documentary, Siskel/Jacobs' *Louder Than a Bomb*, won the Humanitas Prize for Documentary and was one of Roger Ebert's top 10 docs of the year. Most recently, John edited *Finding Yingying*, which won the 2020 Documentary Special Jury Prize for Breakthrough Voice at South By Southwest.

JOSHUA ABRAMS, Original Score

Joshua Abrams is a composer, bassist, and improviser. Since the mid-1990s, he has been a key figure in Chicago's creative music communities and an international touring musician with artists across genres, including his own project, Natural Information Society. Abrams has scored numerous documentaries, including *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, and several films with Steve James, including the Academy Award-nominated *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail*; *Life Itself*; *The Interrupters*; and the acclaimed series *America to Me*.

ABOUT CARA

Cara's mission is to unlock the power and purpose within our communities and ourselves to create real and lasting success. Through their personal and professional development and access to employment opportunities, Cara serves as a leader in poverty alleviation in Chicago and beyond. Since 1991, more than 6,500 people have been placed into more than 10,000 jobs and started on their path to self-sufficiency. Learn more at www.carachicago.org.

MARIA KIM, Executive Director

After 13 years in insurance, Maria Kim joined Cara – a Chicago-based social enterprise reconnecting people experiencing poverty with hope, jobs, and opportunity. Cara has helped people secure over 10,000 jobs, with permanent placements at retention rates over 20 points higher than national norms, and with 80% of employed participants transitioning into permanent housing in which their families can thrive. Maria serves on the boards of EPIC Academy, Rebuilding Exchange, and the University of Chicago Poverty Lab College and Career Advisory Board. She is a 2008 Leadership Greater Chicago Fellow, a 2012 American Marshall Memorial Fellow, a 2018 Vital Voices Global Ambassador, a former co-chair within Chicago Mayor Lightfoot's 2019 transition team, and a 2020 Presidential Leadership Scholar. Maria holds an MBA from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

JESSE TEVERBAUGH, Director of Student and Alumni Affairs

As Cara's Director of Student and Alumni Affairs and a 17-year Cara veteran, Jesse Teverbaugh is a firm believer in the notion that we transform our lives by transforming others. He lives this principle out every day as he oversees the learning experience for all Cara participants in their journey to employment, and in their engagement as alumni as their jobs evolve into careers. Jesse is uniquely qualified for this position, being a graduate of Cara himself, and having worked both as a trainer and as a Director in Cara's flagship social enterprise, Cleanslate. Cara sees over 1,500 people per year, and Jesse's coaching handprint is on nearly every one.

Jesse is frequently called upon by The Chicago School of Professional Psychology and others to share his perspective on the power of transformation, on the role of mental health in our work, and on the trappings of incarceration that extend far beyond any jail cell. He was featured in *The Chicago Reader* as a "Chicagoan to Know" and was chosen as the 2011 National Association for Multi-Ethnicity in Communications (NAMIC) Unsung Hero. His civic engagement includes service as the Past President of the Greater Roseland Chamber of Commerce and 45 years as a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity. His past professional experience includes 18 years in the private sector at Nabisco.

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