



As Goes Janesville Press Kit  
Director's Statement  
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## **As Goes Janesville: Director's Statement**

I stumbled upon a shelf of Robert Altman movies at the old Kim's Video shop on Bleecker Street in the early nineties and watched them in the span of a week. The ones I loved the most were the ensemble pieces that used loosely intertwined story lines to paint a broad picture of a subject, whether power and greed in *Nashville* or war in *MASH*. At the time I was a PhD candidate at New York University studying political philosophy. Within months I quit the program to pursue a career in documentary filmmaking. I saw it as the perfect way to meld political interests — consummated by a stint working for civil rights legend John Lewis' congressional campaign when I was in high school — with a creative urge inspired by not just Robert Altman, but also a documentary filmmaker I'd met a few years earlier named George Stoney. Since the 1930s he'd been using documentary to tell the intimate stories of people who often have no voice in mainstream culture. Combining Altman's approach and Stoney's mission is what I've tried to accomplish on the subject of America's middle class with *As Goes Janesville*.

While Altman had 25 characters in *Nashville*, I found it plenty challenging to wrangle 5 stories: 2 women laid off from GM, 1 from Alcoa, and 2 town leaders guided by contrasting political ideologies in their quest to revive Janesville, Wisconsin in the wake of GM's plant closure. I had in mind the idea that the workers were puppets and the town leaders puppet masters in the sense that workers Gayle, Angie and Cindy don't know Senator Tim Cullen or bank president Mary Willmer, but their lives are directly impacted by Tim and Mary's decisions. You see this when, for instance, Gayle leaves home to chase a job that pays a decent wage while Mary and her economic development colleagues embrace the exile of GM workers as an opportunity to recruit new non-union businesses that pay less.

I also thought a lot about how Fredrick Wiseman takes us behind the scenes of institutions to reveal insights into our bigger world through small stories of specific places. Wiseman's gym coach in *High School* is a bully with a crew cut whose obsession with conformity reveals the social tensions of the sixties. In our film *Mary*, a well-intentioned banker involved in community affairs, aligns herself with billionaire Diane Hendricks who implores Governor Scott Walker to diminish the influence of unions. In a scene I shot in the lobby of Diane's Beloit business, Walker reveals his plan to "divide and conquer" organized labor. A few weeks later he introduces a bill to end collective bargaining for most public employees that ignites a political civil war, sends me to Illinois with Tim, a renegade state senator trying to stop the bill, and culminates in a recall election to which Diane contributes a record \$500,000. The small moment I captured reveals the big issues of money's corrupting influence on democracy and the pawing of the middle class in a larger ideological war that has polarized America.

If Altman's ensemble storytelling and Wiseman's access inform my filmmaking, their commitment to improvisation and discovery inspire my professional joy. While I set out to tell a story about the future of the middle class in Janesville, I never imagined I'd be at the epicenter of historic political turmoil. The thrill of balancing my vision with the need to be nimble and adjust to circumstances is what's most invigorating about documentary filmmaking. I hope I am lucky enough to keep doing it as long as my tribunal of Stoney and Altman did and Wiseman continues to do — and maybe half as well.

*"As Goes Janesville", a film by Brad Lichtenstein, is a co-production of 371 Productions, Kartemquin Films, and the Independent Television Service.*