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**Filmmaker Launches Web Series: Inspired Citizens Revitalizing ‘We the People’**

***Voices of Hope Productions tells stories about ordinary people transforming their communities.***

[***Check out her latest clip.***](http://vimeo.com/64412712)

Lori Ersolmaz tells stories. Hopeful, engaging, inspiring stories about citizens who see problems in their communities, and with an irreverent spirit and without permission, do something about it.

This documentary filmmaker and teacher uses her camera to tell stories about all types of social issues. Her subjects are regular people, propelled to action by a problem they grew tired of witnessing.

Based on the Jersey Shore, Ersolmaz’s stories and subjects have a singular message – voting alone is not citizenship. Through her production company, [Voices of Hope](http://voicesofhope.tv/), Ersolmaz documented a [rebel Trenton artist in his work to transform his city](http://engagingpeople.tv/index/#/kasso-sage-collection-artists-for-change) with positive images, and in Asbury Park she chronicled [Hope Academy Charter School and its founder’s dream](http://engagingpeople.tv/index/#/alexis-c-harris-educator-founder-hope-academy) to give student’s a high quality, community minded education.

“Citizens need to realize they are capable of coming together to deliberate, set their own agendas and devise solutions to problems in their communities,” she said. A democracy, as Ersolmaz puts it, is messy work done by the people, making change from the bottom up. “We need that more now than ever.”

Now Ersolmaz is set to launch her latest work, [*Engaging People Series: Citizens Revitalizing Democracy*](http://www.engagingpeople.tv/), partly inspired by Superstorm Sandy.

In November, when New Jersey was still reeling from the storm, Ersolmaz was feeling caught – so much destruction everywhere. What she found was, at the same time Sandy leveled homes and businesses, livelihoods and spirits, she also pushed down obstacles separating neighbors from each other and citizens from public work. She found neighbors meeting for the first time in public spaces and others had driven cross-country by compassion to help.

One of her subjects, nicknamed Circus Maximus watched the events unfold from his home in Seattle. He hopped on a plane to Philly and rented a U-Haul truck that was transformed into the U-Hungry Café where joined by other citizens they served up hot meals and entertainment to displaced people and volunteers in hard hit Union Beach and Keansburg.

Ersolmaz asked Circus, “Why don’t more people get involved in helping?”

With a red clown nose and all seriousness, he replied, “Because there are professional organizations and that’s all people know. They start to think, ‘Ok well, I don’t need to actually do anything,’” he said. “It sort of creates a barrier between ordinary people doing what’s right.”

The problem now, as she sees it: too much gridlock, too much negativity. Ordinary citizens weighed down by the misconception, ‘What I do isn’t going to make a difference.’

Ersolmaz is emphatic, her voiced raised, “I’m here to say people are doing great public works together and it does make a difference.”

Her goal with the *Engaging People Series* is to effect change by showing citizens empowered in their communities, in ways as unique as they are – artists, clowns, civil servants, faith-based leaders, hippies, executives.  She hopes that her films will spark citizens to become engaged in some small way, rather than not at all.

“Disasters bring out a different, highly compassionate side of civic participation,” she said.  “If people can come together in the aftermath of a disaster, they can do it on a regular basis.”

Sandy provided endless stories to tell about people doing good, but Ersolmaz isn’t just interested in disaster’s ability to bring people together. She wants to reframe citizenship in terms of relationships. They’re messy and hard, but they’re what give our lives and communities meaning. They require the people with something at stake to put their needs on the table to work for a solution. “It builds up our civic fiber.”

Giving voice to those struggles is her passion, but it is not a profitable commercial enterprise. Her work on the series is entirely self-funded.

That’s why she’s set her sites on *Looking@Democracy,* a national digital media contest to answer the question, “How can we work together to strengthen our democracy?” From now until May16 you can view and vote for her three-minute submission on the [*Looking@Democracy*](http://lookingatdemocracy.org/submissions/14662-engaging-people-series-stories-of-citizens-revitalizing-democracy) web site.

Ersolmaz hopes a cash prize and national exposure could give her the opportunity to tell more stories about citizens, engaged and empowered. With the money she would take the *Engaging People Series* on the road for public screenings and dialogue.

“I want to provide examples and role models of civic engagement and encourage other people to participate in our democracy,” she said.

But prize or no prize you, will still find Ersolmaz telling stories to inspire change.

“Nothing is going to prevent me from doing this.”

Engaging People Series: Citizens Revitalizing Democracy

[http://www.engagingpeople.tv](http://www.engagingpeople.tv/)

Submission voting: <http://lookingatdemocracy.org/submissions/14662-engaging-people-series-stories-of-citizens-revitalizing-democracy>