

Many on LI hide money struggles



THE COLUMN

Joye Brown

joye.brown@newsday.com

Hard Times: Lost on Long Island,” an HBO documentary film, had its world premiere yesterday at the Hamptons International Film Festival.

The film follows Long Islanders struggling with foreclosure, bankruptcy and unemployment for nine months. What filmmakers found were local families, increasingly desperate, whose plight was largely hidden.

“We talked to probably 200 people,” Marc Levin, the film’s producer and director, said in an interview. “Their self-imposed isolation stunned me and was incomprehensible to me,” he said.

“It was like, ‘Don’t tell your neighbors,’” he said. “‘Don’t tell your family. Don’t reach out to organizations.’”

The film centers on four families — from Plainview, Wantagh, Smithtown and Montauk — and includes a doctor and a teacher. The filmmakers found the families, and other Long Islanders in similarly sticky straits, in diners, foreclosure clinics and unemployment offices.

Despair and desperation? On Long Island, which for generations defined the best of suburbia for a nation?

Two recent analyses by the Brookings Institution found that suburbs are now home to one-third of the nation’s poor — and the number of poor suburbanites is rising. Part of the reason is that more low-income people are moving in. But the recession is making life harder for middle-class residents, too.

Levin, a part-time Amagansett resident, said he chose Long Island to tell that story because it is home to Levittown, the nation’s first post-



Scene from “Hard Times: Lost on Long Island” documentary

World War II suburb.

But what does it mean to be struggling on Long Island? The federal government sets the poverty line impossibly low — at \$22,113 for a family of four in 2010 — for a region that has among the nation’s highest housing and tax costs.

A better indicator comes from the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, which computes how much a family of four needs to cover necessities, including food, shelter, transportation and taxes.

For Long Island, that was \$71,913 in 2009. But Pearl Kamer, chief economist for the Long Island Association, updated that figure for 2010.

Her conclusion: To make it on Long Island, a family of four needed a basic budget of \$74,430.

Seth Forman, the Long Island Regional Planning Council’s chief planner, measured

the economic stress on local families in other ways.

According to his analysis, the region’s median income — which rose slightly, from \$90,946 to \$92,690, between 2000 and 2008 — dropped to \$86,232 in 2010.

That’s a level not seen since the early 1990s.

Home ownership — the hallmark of suburbia — is also off. The rate is now 79.2 percent in Nassau and Suffolk; in 2008, it was 80.8 percent.

The new rate is the Island’s lowest since before 1970, according to Forman’s analysis.

And then there’s income.

The U.S. Census breaks those numbers into “income bands,” ranging from high to low. On Long Island, the number of households in the top three bands has decreased since the onset of the recession in 2008 — while the number of households in the bottom two bands has increased, according to Forman.

The work of Levin, Kamer and Forman — an artist, an economist and a planner — adds flesh to the notion that Long Islanders are struggling.

But it shouldn’t be in isolation, or in silence.

Levin hopes his film will fuel a hard look at what’s going on in a region that he and his wife, Ellin Burke, who grew up in Malverne and Amityville, call home.

The film will air on HBO in 2012. But there’s no reason to wait to take action. “We need to rediscover a sense of compassion,” Levin said.

He’s right. There’s a meanness in the nation that says poor and struggling people brought their fate upon themselves.

At a time when social services agencies and not-for-profit groups are being cut, more and more local residents need help.

“They are upstanding, good Long Islanders that have been the pillars of the community,” Levin said. “They are us.”