The Queen of Versailles
A documentary film turns a lens on the “1 percenters.”
by LAURA LEVIS

In certain ways, David and Jackie Siegel were just trying to live the American Dream: succeed at business, own a big house, enjoy the spoils of their labor. But after achieving those dreams, they found themselves wanting more—much, much more.

Their 26,000-square-foot house was simply not enough. Happiness could be found, the couple thought, only by building the largest house in all of America: a sprawling, 90,000-square-foot mansion in Orlando, Florida, modeled after the French palace of Versailles, complete with a bowling alley and roller-skating rink, a wing for the children, 10 kitchens, and $5 million of marble.

But when the U.S. economic bubble burst, the Siegels, who were so wealthy they seemed untouchable, turned out to be no different from the tens of thousands of families who lost their far-humbler dream homes. And film director Lauren Greenfield ’87 was there to capture their financial downfall, from Jackie Siegel’s $1-million clothing-budget zenith to the family’s stuck-in-coach-class nadir.

The drama of Greenfield’s recent documentary, The Queen of Versailles, first gripped audiences at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival in January. Screened on the opening night, the film won her an award for best director and has since become one of the most-watched documentaries of the year, prompting speculation that it could earn an Oscar nomination. (The DVD is to be released in mid-November.) “It was the same [old] story about the American dream, but really about the flaws as much as the virtues of that dream, as well as about the mistakes that were made because of the economic crisis,” Greenfield says. “Jackie and David’s story, even though it was extreme, was kind of symbolic of the mistakes we all made on different levels.”

In one scene, a nanny asks Jackie—a former beauty queen from a small town, who’s 30 years David’s junior—if one large, cavernous room in Versailles is a future home for the children, 10 kitchens, and $5 million of marble.

Photograph courtesy of Magnolia Pictures/Lauren Greenfield
**Bluffer-in-Chief**

President Dwight Eisenhower remains a vague figure (genial, a golfer) in public memory, a cipher between the feisty Harry Truman and the glamorous John F. Kennedy. Focusing on the ultimate issue—the threat of nuclear war—Evan Thomas ’73 finds in Ike tactical brilliance and, where needed, ruthless efficacy. From the introduction to his new book, Ike’s Bluff: President Eisenhower’s Secret Battle to Save the World (Little, Brown, $29.99):

Eisenhower was an expert at bridge, an activity now associated in the American mind with middle-aged or elderly people sitting around a table staring at cards. For Eisenhower, who played as much as possible, the game was a relaxing way of doing what he did all day: reading minds, weighing options (his own and others), thinking ahead, and concealing his intentions. Eisenhower, who generally radiated warm sincerity and whose emotions were easy to read, was actually a great bluffer, and not just at cards.

Eisenhower’s basic policy throughout his presidency was known as Massive Retaliation. It was, in essence, a threat to use nuclear weapons against Communist aggression wherever and whenever it might occur. Even in his most private councils, Eisenhower remained vague about what he might or might not do in crisis. His closest adviser, General Andrew Goodpastor, guessed Ike would never use nuclear weapons, but others weren’t so sure, and Eisenhower wasn’t about to tell them.

Indeed, Eisenhower sometimes sounded as if he regarded nuclear weapons as conventional weapons—“like bullets,” he once said. Other times he seemed determined to rid the world of their scourge....Eisenhower’s mission, which he achieved after he extricated America from the Korean War in 1953, was to avoid any war. As a general, Eisenhower had commanded a conquering army in a world war ended only by the use of two atomic bombs. Though he posed as a poor farm boy, he was a scholar who had closely read Clausewitz’s treatise On War, and took to heart its basic, if overlooked, message: that small wars can become big wars, and that a nation fighting for survival will stop at nothing. Eisenhower managed, by cleverness, in- direction, subtlety, and downright deviousness—and by embracing the very weapon he could never use—to safeguard his country and possibly the rest of mankind from annihilation. As the United States and the Soviet Union created the power to end the world in the 1950s, the genial old soldier with a weakened heart contrived to keep the peace. He did so in his own distinctive way. He was honorable but occasionally opaque, outwardly amiable but inwardly seething.

Ike, in a photo likely taken in the late 1940s when he was Army Chief of Staff, playing bridge with General Alfred Gruenther

...and “gilded age” of America). But that was in 2007, when David Siegel’s company—the largest privately owned time-share complex in the nation, the largest privately owned resort complex in the world, the largest privately owned hotel company, the largest privately owned time-share community in the world—was making a bid for the “real life” of the 1 percenters. This story is told in a new film, The Queen of Versailles, in theaters on November 30. The film is the work of Michael Hussein and Jeffrey Dru Greenfield, who wanted to do a real-life look at this family of the 1 percenters—a rags-to-riches story. They chose the Siegels (and others), thinking they had produced a book called All the Right People, about the WASPs of the Northeast. “Part of what drove her [Norfleet] to make that book was that in the archives there were very few photos of rich people,” Greenfield says. “The photos that existed... were only commissioned portraits by the subjects themselves, or society pictures which didn’t have any context because they weren’t natural moments. For me, when I started the Queen of Versailles, it was a little bit similar.”

Greenfield put together a film crew and moved in with the Siegels, at a Hollywood party and immediately fell for the couple’s tale. (The filmmaker had asked if she could photograph Siegel’s ostentatious metallic purse; the image eventually became one of Time magazine’s “Photos of the Year,” illustrating the “high life” and “gilded age” of America.) But that was in 2007, when David Siegel’s company—the largest privately owned time-share...
This past summer, a temporary art installation titled Arts Imbalance brightened the days of many in downtown Boston. On July 1, a dozen volunteers, working from a small boat on the water and on a 300-foot-long yellow tightrope across the city’s Fort Point Channel, anchoring the ends to the Summer Street and Congress Street bridges. A pair of life-size, aluminum, sheet-metal figures—modeled on a classic wooden artist’s manikin—could be seen bobbing above and below the rope. They were coated in refractive dichroic film, which transmits certain wavelengths of light but reflects others, treating observers to prismatic displays of reflected sunlight. Now and again the figures moved in reaction to the wind. The installation, which was the work of Peter Agos, ’75, multimedia artist, who has trained in stage design, sculpture, graphic design, and film, was a labor of love.”

Director Lauren Greenfield

Greenfield—a photographer and film director who has captured youth culture, glamour, and responsibility through projects like HBO’s Real Housewives of Beverly Hills and the global success of her latest film, The Bling Ring, about the young celebrities who plundered the homes of the rich in Los Angeles, was interested in exploring a different kind of youth culture—one that she described as “oxygen-starved.”

“Growing up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, I was surrounded by the cultural phenomenon of the Abercrombie & Fitch generation,” Greenfield says. “They were a force of nature. They were everywhere, and they had a voracious appetite for consumption, and they didn’t have a care in the world. They were like the new era of the 1960s.”

Greenfield knew her film would have a far wider appeal than her last one, and she didn’t expect her little电影(she and her husband, Frank Evers, ’87, financed the film, calling it “a labor of love”) about the shopping habits of the rich to be seen in theaters. But as the Siegel family’s fortunes plummeted unexpectedly before her very eyes, the film was released, and Greenfield’s film, The Bling Ring, became a hit. The film was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and Greenfield was awarded a Special Achievement Oscar for her work.

In February, Greenfield was honored with a special award at the Cannes Film Festival, where she was presented with the Lumière Award for her contribution to the art of film. The award was presented to Greenfield by the French government and the Cannes Film Festival, and it was the highest honor given to a living filmmaker.

Greenfield has trained in stage design, sculpture, graphic design, and film, and has had her photography published in The New York Times, Vanity Fair, and The Atlantic.

Greenfield’s latest film, The Bling Ring, explores the lives of the rich and famous in Los Angeles, and it was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Greenfield’s work has been featured in numerous exhibitions and publications, and she has been awarded numerous prizes and honors for her contributions to the field of photography.
One sentence—one word, really—in the book Eating Animals by Jonathan Safran Foer changed John Schlimm's life. When Schlimm, Ed.M. '02, read about “unloved” Thanksgiving turkeys, "something shifted," he remembers. "I stopped, highlighted the word ‘unloved,’ underlined it, circled it. It was a light-bulb moment for me.”

His life, he says, “took on a whole new and wonderful direction.” Not as a cook—book author—he’d already written seven, including The Ultimate Beer Lover’s Cookbook. Not as a teacher—he’d already taught at a local university. Instead, that one word transformed him from the guy who had helped at his brother’s meat-processing business—skinning deer, cutting meat, and making sausage—into someone who wouldn’t eat or wear animal products. The son of a small-town Pennsylvania butcher, Schlimm, who grew up in hunting country, became a vegan. That moment also inspired him to write two vegan cookbooks, The Tipsy Vegan (2011) and Grilling Vegan Style (2012); another, The Cheesy Vegan, is on the way.

How did someone who never went to culinary school or worked in a restaurant become a cookbook author? Schlimm explains that he's the son of two fantastic cooks as well as a member of the Straub family, which runs one of the country's oldest breweries. He wrote one of his first titles, The Straub Beer Cookbook, in partnership with the brewery, and The Tipsy Vegan, unsurprisingly, includes some sort of alcohol in every recipe. He also has a team of people who help him develop and test recipes.

For Schlimm, food is all about flavor and enjoyment. Vegan hedonism? Isn't that a contradiction? Not with Schlimm's recipes, filled with spices, fruits, nuts, wines, and other alcoholic spirits. He calls his cookbooks "parties between covers." Consider "Bruschetta on a Bender," which combines fragrant fresh thyme and oregano with a couple of dashes of vermouth. "Baked & Loaded Acorn Squash" contains rich fall flavors like cinnamon and nutmeg, warmed up by a hit of Calvados. Mandarin oranges, water chestnuts, and ginger dot his "Wild Rice Under the Influence," a