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PBS documentary examines health disparities

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Two years ago, at age 49, Richmond resident Gwai Boonkeut suffered a near-fatal heart attack. That came a couple years after his 15-year-old daughter was killed by members of a neighborhood gang. For much of his adult life, the Laotian immigrant has worked two jobs to make ends meet and has been plagued by chronic stress.

Clearly, his prospects for a long, fruitful existence are not encouraging.

Boonkeut is one of numerous case studies presented in the new PBS documentary series, "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?" Debuting nationally this week, the series asserts that the social conditions in which we are born, live and work profoundly affect our health and longevity.

"It's so interesting to me that all the presidential candidates have debated the finer details of their health-care plans, but no one is talking about what makes us sick in the first place," says Larry Adelman, the San Francisco filmmaker who produced "Unnatural Causes."

His series is teeming with bleak statistics: Despite being one of the richest countries on Earth, the United States ranks 29th in the world for life expectancy. Also, one out of every three Americans is obese, and chronic diseases cost U.S. businesses more than \$1 trillion per year in lost productivity.

At the root of the problem are glaring disparities

that often hinge on the size of your bank account, the color of your skin or the place you live.

"We are constantly told that good health depends on our genes and our diet and exercise habits," says Dr. Wendell Brunner, the Director, of Public Health, Contra Costa Health Services. "But our physical environment, our socioeconomic and our cultural environment also have an enormous impact on our overall health."

Brunner says these issues have been discussed by the health community for decades, but insists there "needs to be much more discussion."

"Unnatural Causes" attempts to ignite the conversation. Described as a "medical detective story," it opens with an episode called "In Sickness and in Wealth" that explores the disparity in health between the working class and upper class in Louisville, Ky. Profiles of a CEO, lab supervisor, janitor and unemployed mother illustrate how social class shapes access to power, opportunity and resources such as fresh and healthful food.

On average, people at the top live longer, healthier lives, the film explains. Those at the bottom are more disempowered, get sicker more often and die sooner. Surveys of Louisville neighborhoods reveal five- and 10-year gaps in life expectancy between the city's rich, middle- and working-class neighborhoods. A key culprit? Chronic stress.

"Everyone has stress in their lives," says Adelman. "But if you're a top executive, you have more access to resources that help you manage stress. Maybe you delegate some of your work to your underlings. Maybe you're a member of an incredible health club. Maybe you just get on your yacht and sail to Aruba. Not everyone can do that."

An ensuing installment of the documentary

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examines how infant mortality rates among African Americans remain twice as high as for white Americans and raises a provocative hypothesis: the chronic stress of racism can become embedded in African American mothers' bodies and take a toll on their children even before they leave the womb.

Another segment looks at how recent Mexican immigrants, though often poorer, tend to be healthier than the average American. But the longer they live here, the worse their relative health becomes.

A segment called "Place Matters" focuses on Richmond and examines how segregation and a lack of access to jobs, fresh foods, safe parks and affordable quality housing have been harmful to some residents. Again, the stats are alarming: Richmond has higher rates of death from disease and cancer than most surrounding communities. Children are hospitalized for asthma at twice the rate of other Contra Costa County neighborhoods, and the risk of dying from diabetes is nearly twice as high.

"When you think of low life expectancy in places like Richmond, you tend to think about people death by gunshots and of drugs," Adelman says. "But the real killers are heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, diabetes "..."

Ellie Lee, who directed the "Place Matters" segment, said she was struck by the "general sense of hopelessness and fatalism" among some young disadvantaged residents of Richmond.

"Generally speaking, a lot of them talked about how it didn't really matter if they smoked or drank at a young age," she says. "They didn't think they were going to live past the age of 20 anyway. It's like, 'What can you do when there are

all these obstacles in place.' "

Lee was particularly interested in chronicling the plight of immigrants in Richmond. That led her to Boonkeut, who settled in the Bay Area with his family in 1981. In October of 2003, his daughter, Chan, was gunned down in their home, a victim of a highly publicized mistaken-identity shooting.

In the film, Boonkeut discusses the wear and tear his body has experienced over the years and, at one point, displays the numerous bottles of pills he is forced to rely on every day.

But Adelman hopes that viewers will realize from watching his film that good health comes down to so much more than a strong supply of pills.

"We want to reframe the health debate," he says. "A lot of it comes down to public policies that have been made in the past that can be remade. There are things we could be doing right now to create healthier societies."

Brunner agrees, pointing out that Richmond is in the process of incorporating a "health and wellness" element into the city's new General Plan that calls for, among other things, more park space and bike trails, and addresses issues such as nutrition, hazardous materials and contamination, air and water quality and housing quality.

"What's encouraging is that there are ways to take action," Brunner says. "It doesn't have to be the way it has been."

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TV DOCUMENTARY

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n **WHAT: "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?"**

Us Sick?"

n **WHEN: 10 p.m. Thursday**

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