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The County of Mercy

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Author

Berkowitz, Charles Alexander

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The County of Mercy

Charles Berkowitz



"The County of Mercy" is a short documentary, which brings the audiences to front lines of emergency medicine alongside the paramedics of Merced County, California.

As we travel down a darkened highway, faint raindrops begin to appear on the windshield. The ambulance's emergency strobes pierce into outlying pistachio and almond fields and are occasionally reflected back at us in the eyes of a lone coyote. Troy, an EMT, turns up a Chopin Nocturne on the radio. Dispatch crackles – *Medic 6: Code 1 MVA in Delhi. Bystander is reporting traumatic arrest on scene. What's your ETA?*

"Two minutes out Merced Central," Troy responds calmly into the radio.

California highway 99 consists of a single lane in either direction, flanked by irrigation ditches. Dented guardrails and skid marks whisper of harrowing accidents despite Caltrans best efforts to twist the metal back into shape and scrape the disintegrated tire treads from the asphalt. Families of the departed mark the sites with white shrines and wilting flowers.

We drive past large groups of migrant farm workers piling into large trucks, homeward bound from the fields. Paramedic Walter Parton sits stoically in the captain's chair and fastens his belt around his waist. Walter is an older man in his fifties with a stoic John Wayne quality about him.

The highway we're traveling on transforms into suburbia as housing developments begin to appear outside the ambulance's side windows. As we turn a corner, a large riot erupts in the middle of the street. "We've got major trauma here," says Troy looking back from the front seat.

As we exit into the melee, Walter grabs the trauma bag and a backboard. We hear sharp cracks from rocks against ambulance exterior. Suddenly, the sounds of the crowd slowly drown into a dull, concussive roar. Something flies past, obscuring our vision for a few seconds. We look down to find a shattered, foaming beer bottle. As Walter and Troy reach the woman, the sound of the brawl explodes into a din of chaos.

A small, dilapidated car is stopped in the middle of the slick road, its hazard lights blinking and windshield wipers slowly moving back and forth. The windshield is shattered and clumps of long, black hair hang from the glass. A body of an older Hispanic woman lies

motionless, face down next to the vehicle. She attempts to speak but only blood and spittle comes from her lips. A man behind her drops to his knees. "Mi madre!" he screams to the sky.

As the crew turns the woman over, her scalp flaps backwards. Troy holds her head steady as she's placed onto the backboard and lifted into the bright interior of the ambulance.

Inside, the crew injects the woman with a strong sedative and she stops moving. Walter inserts a breathing tube into her mouth and starts another IV. The siren wails into the night and as the ambulance begins moving, the rubber IV lines whip violently back and forth above the patient. We stay with the woman until the sound of a medevac helicopter is heard approaching in the distance. The crew ignites magnesium flares to guide the helicopter into a landing zone and the woman is offloaded from the ambulance; her broken body flown to the nearest trauma center 25 miles away.

These are the emergency workers of Merced County, California. Each year, they respond to 36,000 911 calls spread out over 2000 square miles. Their specialty is triage: immediate recognition and treatment of the sick and dying. Yet, for the most part, the job remains unseen, save for the few souls involved, and it repeats itself often into distant obscurity. The wounded here face a crucible within which they are tested and too often, quickly forgotten.

"The County of Mercy" is a short documentary highlighting the work of paramedics from Riggs Ambulance Service – a family owned and operated company - which has served the area of Merced County (one of the nations hardest hit regions for unemployment and foreclosure crisis), for over 65 years. The film will introduce us to a rural American county rife with poverty and hardship through the perspective of medics who have taken on the role of mobile physicians. We will be on the front lines of emergency medicine alongside them- granted rare access to the calls they go on, their personal lives, and the lives of the patients they treat.

Following Riggs medical crews through their twelve and twenty-four hour shifts, we will witness first-hand the problems of the poor and uninsured, and how their lives are inextricably linked to the safety net of society – the emergency medical services. Taking us outside of the emergency room and into the lives and living conditions of the Merced, the film will reveal the humanity of a community at its most exposed and vulnerable. At these moments of fragility, one Riggs medic said it best: "People open their doors to us." The drunk with a broken leg, the child with diabetes, the emphysemic with chest pain, the 18 year old shot in the chest. For all of societies ills, it is almost always the medics' hands that first touch those have been injured in Merced.

As of July 2013, the unemployment rate in Merced County was 14.6%. In ten years, two out of six hospitals now remain in the county. A decade ago, the number one call was for chest pain, difficulty breathing, and car accidents. Now, the number one call by a landslide is a non- lights- and -sirens response for an ill person. The weight has shifted from immediate medical necessity to primary care for a poor, uninsured population. Despite this, Riggs, like many agencies across the nation, has adapted and tried to stay tied in every aspect of the

community- from providing medical care at high school football games to caring for multiple patients shot amidst gang violence. Their fleet is recognized throughout California as providing some of the best medical care despite their rural environment.

We will be offered a glimpse into the lives of these men and women dedicated to the community they live and work in. Driving past high voltage power lines, farmhouses, and dry grass that dress the landscape, we'll hear them speak openly about fatigue, fear of failure, discrepancy in health care, religion, disease, and their own personal battles with addiction, alcohol, and stress. We will come to find that the work of a paramedic is largely misunderstood by the general population – that they are as much social workers as they are mobile nurses trained to deal with every emergency they encounter.

Throughout the film, we are offered a unique perspective about daily routines of the several Riggs emergency crews and their unique motivations for getting into the emergency medical services. We'll meet medics like Walter Parton, the unofficial “grandfather” of Riggs, who when he first began working for Riggs 25 years ago, carried a stethoscope and blood pressure cuff along with a .44 Magnum (when he would work as the sheriff of Dos Palos on the weekends). On his off days, Michael Garret plays in a hard rock band and his wife works in the dispatch bay. Vin Nguyen took a leave of absence and drove his car all the way to Alaska to work on a fishing boat. Currently he's in Philippines treating victims of Typhoon Haiyan. Carly Kinkaid began as an EMT and is now one of the top medics at Riggs, working as a supervisor and medic for Merced SWAT. The rookie medic, Jack Alvort, was professional baseball player before he began working for Riggs. And when she's not working on the bus, Sadie Trasta shoots skeet, hunts, fishes, and is learning to become a helicopter pilot.

We'll accompany the crews on calls with patients as well follow them as they are transported to the emergency room via ambulance or helicopter. As witnesses to horrific pain, excitement, and life and death decisions, we will come view to world of a paramedic as a microcosm of life, where the defibrillation of a shuddering heart promises the continuation of life or where the mangled arm of a migrant farm worker carries the weight of social injustice.

The County of Mercy

Fade up: Shot of road at night

Cut to: Card – Merced, California

Cut to: verite scene Ped vs Train. Brian and Alejo

Walter Parton VO to interview:

I had watched my father get up, day after day, to go do a job. He didn't seem really happy with it because he had a family to support, so I decided early on, that I wanted to do something I wouldn't get angry at every time the alarm clock went off. So I first decided on law enforcement. There was an ambulance company here that was, more or less, volunteer. So I would take shifts on the ambulance at the same time. And I found out, if I showed up in a patrol car, everybody was angry. But if I showed up in an ambulance, they'd invite me in their home and was pretty happy that I came.

Fade up: Sound FX " Ambulance Wail / 911 Call

Fade up: Title sequence montage

Title fade up: "The County of Mercy"

Cut to: Traveling shot outside moving ambulance.

Walter Parton:

If I am a painter, and I paint a house, I can stand back and I can say, "Look what I did. The house was all run down and I painted it and now it looks better." A lot of times, we don't get that satisfaction with people. When you work in a county such as Merced, There'll be times I'll be standing in the grocery store line, I'll be sitting at church, or I'll be sitting somewhere with my family, and have people actually come up and say "Thank you" for what you'd done for them and their family. So that gives you that fulfillment. Or it does me. All of the awards and all of that stuff is probably a more bother to me that they're actually worth. It's that little appreciation from some patient or a family member that we've taken care of. So you hang on to those very rare moments to get you through it.

Carly Alley:

I like that it might be the middle of the night and I end up in an ally on some crazy call or meet somebody who's 99 years old and you get to go in their house and see their entire life on their walls. And maybe be there at that moment when their spouse is passing because that, for me, I think that really brings back a lot of meaning of life rather than just everyday stuff.

Fade up: Music.

Michael Garrett:

A lot of these calls that I run, I don't feel like I've done any good for anybody. I was just sort of a means to an end. But on the ones that you get in there and actually do something, and they're thanking you, and they're legitimately happy about what

you did, it feels good you know? You just, kind of, smile and tell them, “Oh it’s no problem. All in a days work,” but it feels good. A lot of people couldn’t do what we did for them. I served a purpose. I will never use the word “hero” , but I served a purpose. I did something good.

Cut to: verite scene with MVA patient. Walter and partner

L Cut to Walter Parton:

When I’ve done all I can for that person, my focus has to shift. It’s not a question of – well, they’re gone, let’s sign the paperwork and get out of here. There still are other people around who are affected by this, so your focus has to change. It’s what I feel at the moment of what’s going on. Because a lot of times, my EMT partners will say, “What do you want me to do on this call?” They’ll give me a scenario. I tell them I don’t know. I probably don’t do the same thing twice. We’ll make it up as we go along. (laughs)

Cut to: verite scene with MVA patient. Walter

Cut to Carly Alley verite

Carly Alley:

I have to make sure that I do not get tunnel vision because every other piece on scene- fire, law enforcement, the helicopter that’s coming, and dispatch – they’re all really important. It’s not just what I’m doing with the ambulance and with the patients. We have to make sure that traffic is still flowing, that our units aren’t in the way, that we know where the helicopter is coming from, or we have one and dispatch always knows what’s going on at the same time, and that you hear your radio, when we’re using triage tags. There’re a lot of things that need to get done. So it’s kind of amazing to me, sometimes when we do run one of these calls –it’s kind of seamless, yeah we did it- but if you think back to what you’ve actually done in those fifteen minutes, it’s kind of crazy.

Cut to: Dispatch verite.

Cut to: verite scene with MVA vs. bicycle patient. Carly.

Cut to: verite scene altered mental status patient.

L cut Michael Garrett:

Best partner I’ve ever had. Best partner I’ve ever had. And I’ve worked with a lot of them. I’ve worked with lot of good ones. But he... When we first started working together, a lot of other people didn’t think we would get along but we’ve got a lot in common. We’ve got a lot of things we don’t have in common. But we just, sort of, make those things work. We’ve got similar families. We both have three kids. I went to medic school with him. I’ve been here about as long as him.

Cut to: verite shots of sick patient. Michael and Alex.

Alex Drake:

He's a really good medic. I trust him 100%. I trust him with my life. I totally trust him working on my family or my parents. He's a cool character. (laughs) And he plays the guitar really good.

Cut to: verite shots of sick patient. Michael and Alex.

Michael Garrett:

I work right in the middle of Atwater, which is where I grew up, so it's kind of cool. My family still lives in Atwater, my mom lives there, my brothers and everybody so there's a good chance on any given day that I run a call with someone I went to high school with or a teacher or any number of people I've met somewhere before.

Cut to: verite scene of febrile patient. Michael and Alex.

Cut to: verite Menonite pediatric seizure scene. Mike and Alex.

L cut Carly Alley:

If you don't find humor in it, I think it would totally eat you alive. I don't know how we could do it every single week, you know, for 24 hours at a time, being exhausted. If we didn't have great personalities working together that kind of compliment each other, and a lot of it around then there's no way you could survive.

Cut to: Merced County montage

L Cut to: Steve Melander:

Running an ambulance service in Merced County is challenging. It's challenging to meet urban response times in a rural community.

Merced County is primarily agriculture. You have one large metropolitan area, which would be the city of Merced, approximately 100,000 people. And then you have a whole smattering of towns and townships and cities that are 3,4, 5 thousand people they're separated by some pretty good geography.

The calls that we run, we do see a good cross section of the population, from the most impoverished to the most wealthy. Obviously there are more challenges to maintaining your health if you have fewer resources. I see some changes occurring there with people having more access to health care. More access to preventative health care. That's the key to having a healthy community – is having access to preventative health care not reactive health care.

Michael Garret:

Before the unemployment rate hit 10%, we were at 18 in Merced County. And that was early 2000, so when they were talking about the country hitting 10% I kind of thought it was funny because we've been that way forever for as long as I've known it. It was really hit hard by the housing crisis, from what I understand. I know I was a victim of it. A lot of people I know were. So... Yeah. A lot of poor people. A lot of homeless people.

Jesse Fernandez:

I deal with a lot of 30 to 40 year old people that look like they're 50-60 years old because they've had a rough way of life. And it's pretty much from not taking care of themselves or some time of addictions which leads to where they don't want to take care of themselves. Why that's happening in Merced a lot more now? I don't really understand that or I don't know the answer to that. But, unfortunately, that's happening in Merced right now.

Cut to: verite scene with GI bleed/ pre- cardiac arrest patient. Jesse, Mike, and Alex.

Jesse Fernandez:

There's a lot of unknown in this job because usually when we're en route to a call, they'll give us a nature. Which means they'll tell us if it's a cardiac call, a respiratory or, you know, somebody fell off a ladder type of thing. But a lot of times, the 911 caller is so upset over the whole incident that they kind of give the wrong information. I mean it happens sometimes. So we'll get the wrong info and show up and it's something completely different. Usually when they give me a nature, I tend to just take part of it in. Like, "Ok, it can possibly be a respiratory call and then I get there and the patient is seizing," type of thing. I don't really rely too much on that. It's just like I'm going to get there and whatever happens, happens.

Cut to: verite jumper up scene.

L cut: Walter Parton

One call that I had, for some reason, it took about 3 days to get over with and it was a call where a car went off in a canal and some children had drowned. I was second unit on and I had taken the mother and father. The only reason I took them was it was November and I was treating them for hypothermia. Nothing traumatic about the call. But the mother asked me in Spanish about her babies. And...uh...I think it was about three days. I couldn't get her eyes out of my head. But as far as – you can only imagine the amount of tragedy and nasty calls of anything you've imagined in your worst nightmare, I've dealt with dozens of times. That one... I don't know. I took several days to get out of my head.

Fade up: Music

Cut to: verite OB patient scene. Brian and Alejo.

L cut: Walter Parton

I tell people that this is my job and it's also my ministry. Because the bible has commanded us what? To lay hands on the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison. Who else do you know that does everything? Who else do you know that can go to a federal prison and go minister or treat these people than us? Like I said, everyone likes us, we're invited into their homes regardless, so... yeah... it is a ministry.

Cut to: verite scene with elderly gentleman. Mike and Alex

Cut to: Black

Fade up: Music

Fade up: Ambulance backwards tracking shot

Fade up: Sound FX / Sirens / 911 call

Fade out