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Assignment: Write self-reflexive essay on your documentary production.

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When we were first faced with the task of a 24-minute documentary we had a number of feasible story proposals. Two of these proposals were hard news, investigative documentaries which would have caused a temporary public outcry if we had managed to prove our hypothesis and get the sources we wanted but both would have had a short life-span and we were not guaranteed we could produce these proposed documentaries within the given production cycle. When the wheelchair basketball idea was proposed it came across as a feasible documentary idea, given our time constraints, as we would be able to build relationships with our subjects and unlike an investigative documentary there would be no need to struggle with government officials and access, which we have learnt from previous experience can set a production cycle back for weeks.

When we decided to go ahead with the production of a documentary on wheelchair basketball our main aim was to break the stereotypical mould of a disabled person. Inspired by Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro's documentary *MURDERBALL*, about wheelchair rugby in North America, we began our journey which we hoped would change able-bodied peoples perceptions of disabled people. On South African television coverage of disabled people more often than not represents them as helpless individuals. Even in paraplegic sport coverage the viewer often feels more sympathy with the subject rather than respect for what they are doing. Initially we set out to portray our disabled subjects as people first and foremost, who live normal lives in injured bodies. However with guidance from our executive producer we realised that we would not be able to sustain our audiences attention nor hook them in until they were made aware of the disabilities from the beginning. Therefore we restructured our story and scrapped our first edit which we had gruelled over for seven days. The new, refined, edit structure allowed us to hook our audience almost immediately and in a sense enabled us to "piggyback" on the disabled stereotype that we had so desperately tried to avoid when we began production. Our final edited version introduces the characters along with their disabilities in the first few minutes of the piece. Once all the characters have been introduced and their tragic stories recounted the documentary picks up pace as wheelchair basketball is introduced as the common thread between all our characters. The introduction of wheelchair basketball signals the turning point in the documentary.

We had a two week pre-production period, once we had decided on the wheelchair basketball story we used our pre-production time to research wheelchair basketball and disabled sports more. We also made contact with wheelchair basketball organisers at Mandeville, the most recognised disabled sports club in the country, they put us in touch with Eastern Cape teams and we soon found a source for possible characters. In our final week of pre-production we drove to Port Elizabeth (PE) as a crew to meet the PE team, the Eastern Spears, and explain to them what we hoped to achieve through our documentary and find willing participants. We conducted brief pre-interviews and got contact details, on the journey back to Grahamstown we discussed who we thought would be the strongest characters for our documentary. In the production process we spent a lot of time travelling to shoots therefore we often spoke about the look and feel of the documentary and where we were going with it. During our pre-production period we finalised our PE subjects and organised shooting schedules, we also made contact with the East London Border Brumbies team manager, Ayanda Nanga, and arranged a shooting schedule with his team. We also watched *MURDERBALL* which won acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival in 2005 for its representation of quadriplegics, and the television series *Friday Night Lights* which tells the story of a young football player who is paralysed in a football match and later finds a new sport in wheelchair rugby. As I was main cameraperson I read up on shooting styles and organised the equipment and packed tapes so that we were prepared for our shoots, we also finalised our proposal, treatment and questions.

Before we embarked on meeting our subjects I was concerned about us coming across as story-hungry journalists. We needed to make sure they understood our reasons for wanting to tell their stories and in order to do this we also had to be sensitive to their needs and be aware of our interaction with them. Pete has grown up with disabled people in his life therefore I was able to figure out from him how to be sensitive towards disabled people without being patronising. Pete gave me a short breakdown of what phrases could be taken as offensive by disabled people and also etiquette, for example how to greet someone when they don't have hands. Looking back it seems like a silly reason for concern because I soon learnt that living in a world where able-bodied people are the norm it is very difficult to offend disabled people. When one makes a faux pas they generally just write it off as ignorance, or catch you out and make a joke. I really enjoyed working with this group of people as it took me out of my comfort zone – I have never known anyone confined to a

wheelchair and they were such lovely, strong-willed people, which gave us more reason to create a documentary to break stereotypical ideas able-bodied people have of disabled people.

Our four main characters were very motivated, independent individuals so we could depict them as successful people and help the audience to connect with their characters. We did this by using cutaways of them doing ordinary daily tasks such as driving, making dinner, working, etc. We chose the two captains of each side to focus on, both had fascinating yet completely different stories to tell. We wanted to tell Maria and Deonette's (Dee's) stories as they are both single-parent mothers and we reasoned that by telling their stories we could also show their independence.

Unfortunately we did this to the detriment of giving both sides equal coverage yet I still feel that the two female characters add an interesting dimension to the piece and take it to a different level – other than just being about sport through which they met – their stories definitely add an emotional aspect through which the viewer can relate to.

The day after we received our gear we began production with an early morning call time of 05:20. When we originally committed to doing a documentary out of Grahamstown we didn't realise the level of commitment it would take on our parts but everyone was always on time when we left for shoots and eager to see how the day would unfold. Pete drove whenever we travelled which in enabled Jess and I to sleep and therefore be well rested for our early morning shoots when we arrived. Pete's dedication to the production and overall vision to complete it within time helped me stay committed to the crew and the final project. When we weren't out shooting for the day we were in the edit suite capturing the previous day's footage and typing out log sheets and transcriptions preparing for post-production and also making notes on what we still needed for our story. Unfortunately not all members of the crew showed the same level of commitment as Pete and myself and we definitely had group dynamic issues. Initially I tried to sort them out democratically but when I compared the amount of work put in by each crew member I had to side with Pete. Even after discussing our crew issues with our executive producer and coming up with a plan to work past these issues and achieve our goals Jess still managed to let us down. After promising to have the transcriptions finished by a particular date, a week later than the stipulated date, as post-production drew nearer, there was still no sign of them. It was only when we were in our post-production week that she admitted that she had lied to us about how far she was on transcribing and was in fact only on tape three of

thirteen. It is because of examples like this that I felt that for the most part this whole year Pete and I have been a two-man team. Every new task we are assigned she gets enthusiastic and tells us how she plans to contribute yet she never acts on her promises and no amount of crew discussions around dynamics and teamwork has rectified this issue.

Whenever we arrived on location we would do a wrecky and once we had discussed our best options of where to set up an interview Pete and I would go about lighting the space, I would also set up the camera whilst Jess would get sound ready and Pete would try to calm the nerves of the interviewee. Pete would do most of the interviewing and afterwards Jess and I would ask any questions we thought had been missed, this process worked well for us, especially when we were in EL and the interviewees kept throwing the interviewer off. Our characters were for the most part very open and I feel that in a way they were as eager as us to address misconceptions of disabled people.

My overall role in the documentary was as firstly as camera person and making sure we had all the equipment prepared before we went out on a shoot. I also helped with the production file and did a majority of the transcribing, logging of tapes, capturing tapes and shooting schedules. I was also responsible for transcribing the final script. Before we began re-editing our piece from scratch we were advised to break down each character into concrete and abstract concepts, we each took on a character or two to analyse and put them together. Jess and I then compared the common themes between the characters. Through this process we were able to build a clearer idea of our characters stories and weave them together harmoniously through the use of the champagne glass model edit. Jess and I then met with Pete to discuss our new edit and together we proposed a final edit plan which excluded the weekly build up to the game completely and rather showed each team on different occasions practicing. During post-production I spent hours with Pete working on our final project and advising him what cutaway to use – having logged most of the footage I had a good grasp of what we had and could make suggestions when he was stuck. I also spent hours in the edit suite by myself audio-mixing, as Pete had done a majority of the editing I felt it only fair to volunteer for this tedious but necessary task. I also helped find the music for our documentary which played a vital role in building emotion, especially at the final game.

Although we had group dynamic issues I feel we really tried to sort them out, at the end of the day we still managed to complete our documentary well within the dead-line and of broadcast standard and we achieved in the fact that it is interesting - it holds the audiences attention which was one of our main challenges in producing a 24-minute documentary. I am privileged to have been involved in this documentary, the characters portrayed in *Wheel Turn* are all real people with amazing personalities and outlooks on life, just being in their presence has enriched my life and I hope that we did them justice in our portrayal of them.

After note: Sadly we found out this week that one of our main characters, Dee, was killed on Monday when a truck collided with the minibus she was travelling in carrying the newly amalgamated PE – EL team from a Super League game in Johannesburg. One of the EL players also died and one of the PE players is in hospital along with Dee's son, Ivan. It's hard to believe that just four weeks ago we were on court with this amazing person, she had so many hard knocks in life from childhood meningitis, to been brought up in an orphanage, to her divorce and yet she was one of the most positive, outgoing people I have ever met. I only spent five days with her but I don't think I will ever forget her. This documentary is now a tribute to her and hopefully it will keep the memory of her spirit alive for years to come - even if it is just for her friends and family.