

MEXICO

Video Birth

While in Mexico last winter a birth took place. Our friends, Sandy and Linda were in Progreso, Yucatan, awaiting the delivery of their first child, and we raced to meet the arrival, video gear at hand.

We made it in time (in fact, we had to wait two weeks before the event took place). At 4 PM on the day Linda went into labor, I set up a strong flood light above the hammock (she was to deliver in pure Mayan style, with a hammock, and a local midwife . . . sans drugs, and with all the energy befitting a first delivery), plugged in the Portapak, and checked the scene in the viewfinder.

For about two hours things progressed slowly, and smoothly. I raced around, going back to our nearby house to have a bite of supper and to get Colleen to assist in the delivery. By about six o'clock, things looked interesting, and I began taping short bits of the labor. Contractions increased in strength and frequency, and the midwife checked Linda for signs of imminent delivery.

Little by little the event drew closer. Linda was nervous and anxious. The bright light was bothering her, so it was shut off except when the camera was rolling. I was concerned about interfering with the flow, the camera becoming just another item to worry the expectant mother.

By 8:00, the labor was well progressed, and I had shot about 10 minutes of tape, condensing the long hours into a brief sketch of the events. Things then began to pick up rapidly. The water broke, and Linda was well along. As the time came closer, she became more nervous and I became more concerned about the taping being a hindrance in the delivery. The Mayan midwife, however, was cooled out about the whole thing, having delivered some 2000 babies in fifteen years without a major problem.

Both Sandy and Linda kept saying they wanted the tape to be shot, so I stuck with it. It was the chance I had been after for a long time. Two years earlier, I had tried to get hospital permission to film my son Zachary's birth, but had been denied permission. (As it turned out, the delivery had to be by Caesarean section, and a film of surgery was completely verboten.)

By 10 PM the pace was frantic. I was shooting with each contraction. Linda was working hard at getting the baby out, and her muscles pushed the infant closer and closer to the delivery point. I was poised with camera in hand, pointing at the emerging head. There was no slick hospital procedures or pulled up white sheets to block the important scene from my view. It was happening right out front.



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photos: Tobe Carey

Push by push the baby moved out, and the tape got it all . . . the hard work, the stretching agony of the baby's head against Linda's vaginal walls, the excitement of the onlookers and helpers trying to urge the baby out.

Then, all in a rush, the head popped out, and the pressure lessened on Linda. The midwife aided the rest of the way, and a healthy baby girl was born. It was a moment of joy felt around the room. Linda lay back, exhausted and nerve wracked . . . too tired to move. It would be a few hours before she was able to hold her child. Cutting the umbilical cord and



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pushing out the placenta came next, and signaled the end of the delivery itself. What remained was for the baby girl to be looked at, admired and cooed over, while Linda was treated for her exhaustion and slight shock. The midwife attended to it all, professional and competent, while we enjoyed the delightful little bundle.

Now, months later, whenever the tape is viewed, it still gives me a rush. I find myself pushing along with Linda, trying to get that all important head out into the open. I've been told by many that the tape constitutes their only real information about birth. It's important stuff to know . . . and regardless of the heavy moments involved in this particular delivery, it can go a long way towards opening all those closed minds and secret doors about the origin of life.

The tape was shot in February, 1972. By July, I had shown it a number of times throughout the local area, and had received a warm reception everywhere. People seemed to feel it was an important tape, one which clearly showed the process of birth.

With that in mind, I designed a show for Kingston Cablevision, which would include the delivery sequence from the birth tape, along with hard facts and information about giving birth in the Kingston area.

The doctor and nurse who appeared on the show were both very involved with promoting Lamaze childbirth methods. They spoke clearly and effectively about the attributes of the Lamaze method, and I assembled their talk along with the birth sequence.

Now, I knew that the birth itself was not an example of a 'good' Lamaze delivery. The woman was not happy and smiling, and was not without distress. I felt it was important to have a disclaimer in the tape, absolving the doctor and nurse of any relationship with the actual birth, and stating that the birth sequence was not meant to depict Lamaze methods. I thought the disclaimer was clear and forthright. It proceeded the birth sequence, and also gave anyone viewing adequate time to switch the channel away from the "sensitive" material to follow.

Little did I know that the audience (or at least a part of it) would be unable to make the distinction between talking about Lamaze as a method of childbirth, and showing a childbirth that was clearly stated to not be a Lamaze delivery. The viewers connected the pieces for themselves, and both local doctors and pregnant women called the doctor who appeared on the show, complaining to him about the strong birth they had witnessed on their living room screens. Many women were afraid that this would be the situation they would meet in labor and delivery.

The doctor called me, and told me what had transpired. Since the show was scheduled to be repeated the following week, he asked that the part in which he appeared be separated from the part showing the birth. He was under great pressure from his colleagues and patients. They were taking the delivery sequence as an example of Lamaze; an example that he felt was harming the cause.

So I agreed to separate the sequences, and to show only the informational part, leaving the childbirth for another time. Indeed, in my mind that was the most vital part of the show, the part that really 'explains' what childbirth *can* be like. So, the key is to now develop a format in which that footage can be used without fear of misinterpretation by the audience.

Maybe I'll cut it with the sequence I recently shot of a cat giving birth to two kittens. Maybe I'll just show the human birth by itself, with a statement by the mother on the front. What is obvious is the lack of hard information most humans have about the process which brought them into the world, and the importance of having readily available this and other video material on giving birth.

Tobe Carey

Giving Birth: A 30 minute tape showing a live childbirth shot in the Yucatan, Mexico in February 1972. All the pressure and reality of giving birth are depicted—no punches pulled—very dramatic. \$28 for tape + the information. \$15 if you provide the tape. For more information contact: Tobe Carey, True Light Beavers, Willow, N.Y.