

Social Doc in Real Time: It Begins at Conception

Posted by [Eva Harder](#) [1] on January 30, 2013

It's difficult to imagine what a woman might say after giving birth, but few of them immediately declare that they want to make a documentary film. American University professor [Brigid Maher](#) [2] is currently working on "[The Mama Sherpas](#) [3]," a film that explores how doctors and midwives work together in a hospital system, known as collaborative care models. The Center for Social Media will be featuring a series of posts on the film, exploring how documentary films are born, raised, and shaped into successful agents of social impact.

When Maher found out she was pregnant with her second child, she knew she didn't want to have another C-Section. So she consulted [midwifery services](#) [4] at George Washington University, and she began asking questions. Most of the information available pointed patients toward one of two directions: an at-home birth or a traditional hospital birth. So Maher asked, "What is the middle ground?"

Making the Middle Ground Matter



After months of research and a successful hospital birth assisted by a midwife, Maher knew that more women needed to be informed about

their options. "What can women do to avoid becoming one of the [30 percent](#) [5] [of C-Sections in America] without having a home birth?"

But as a filmmaker, Maher has discovered that topics that are not controversial or sensational tend to be overlooked by the mainstream media. And as a storyteller, Maher tends to gravitate toward thematic issues, but audiences need a character-driven story in order to connect.

"You are more apt to identify with a topic area if there is a strong character that's leading the story," she said. "I tend to become more interested in a theme and topic area, and then I have to find dynamic characters within this subject of interest that I'm exploring in the documentary to help me lead it."

Breaking Barriers to Access

The quality of a documentary's story is in jeopardy if the filmmaker is not granted full access. "Often times hospital midwives are overlooked," Maher said, so she didn't have trouble working with midwives themselves. They were eager to share their perspectives, and each of them had unique stories about how they became midwives.

But Maher was challenged by the Risk Assessment and Legal departments of hospitals, which were

unwilling to grant Maher full editorial control. “[Hospitals] are concerned about the risks involved,” Maher explained. “What if you film a birth gone wrong?” Maher spoke to hospitals that were willing to have her film births, but only under the provision that revisions could be made in the case that something did go wrong with a procedure.

After spending four months working with a hospital she planned to feature in “The Mama Sherpas,” the hospital remained unwilling to grant Maher the access she needed, forcing her to seek out other hospitals that would. “You can’t compromise,” she said. “To tell a compelling story, you need to have access...”

“...And you need to work with your partners.” Maher stressed that partnerships, like hers with the [American College of Nurse-Midwives](#) [6], are invaluable in gaining access and making an effective documentary. The importance of partnerships and how to find them will be explored in next week’s post.

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- [4] <http://www.gwhospital.com/hospital-services/womens-services/midwifery-services>
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