Why Me?:

Special Screening of the Pioneering Documentary on Breast Cancer

USC ANNENBERG
The Norman Lear CENTER

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WHY ME? A VISIONS & VOICES EVENT

In 1974, journalism professor Joe Saltzman produced *Why Me?*, a landmark documentary acknowledged to be the first television documentary on breast cancer. This program was viewed by one out of every three women in the Western world, and has been credited with saving thousands of lives. In 1974, it was an act of courage for a woman to appear on television to talk about what was considered a deadly disease. The event included remarks by Saltzman (featured here) and was followed by a panel discussion about the making of the program and how it paved the way for contemporary documentaries.

A video of the program can be watched in its entirety online at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwSx2J41Zsk

WHY ME? A VISIONS & VOICES EVENT

Joe Saltzman: Thanks to Marty Kaplan, Geneva Overholser and the audience for being here.

I also want to thank USC Annenberg as well as Visions & Voices and the USC Arts and Humanities Initiative for sponsoring this event. I want to thank USC Annenberg's Lee Warner who did a splendid job helping me restore *Why Me?* as well as Chuck Boyles and Jim Yoder for their help in making this video available.

What I want to do tonight is to give you an inside look at how this documentary came to be and how it was put together, and a sense of a time and place when breast cancer was not talked about or discussed in the media.

Today everybody talks about breast cancer, but in the early 1970s, it was a taboo subject. With the exception of a few magazines that catered to women, no one mentioned it. It was something to be discussed between a woman and her doctor and no one else. The only recommended and accepted treatment for breast cancer then was something called a radical mastectomy and few women even knew what that operation was all about. Reconstructive surgery was simply not an option.

I had just completed a 30-minute documentary on the crime of Rape that was so controversial that TV Guide refused at first to list the title since the word "rape" was then taboo. In 1970, the crime of rape was always referred to as "criminally assaulted." But the documentary became the highest rated documentary in Los Angeles TV history and resulted in changes in California law regarding courtroom procedures. What I didn't know was that a group of UCLA doctors had seen the program and wanted a documentary produced that would publicize breast cancer and urge women to do something about it, to do self-examinations and to get a mammography. Their worry was that few women were getting mammographies and that the public was dangerously uninformed about breast cancer.

I was reluctant to do the program. Although I had finally won approval to do the documentary on rape from the newly created National Organization for Women, who at first felt only a woman should have produced the program, I didn't want to go through that hassle again. But the UCLA doctors persuaded me that a documentary on breast cancer would save many lives and perform a real public service. So Executive Producer Dan Gingold and I agreed to do the program.

It was a time when the mass media refused to even talk about breast cancer. An example of what I mean is that the American Cancer Society had produced a commercial urging women to perform self-examination of their breasts. The commercial consisted of a woman taking a shower, barely visible behind a thick wall of glass, while actress Tammy Grimes' voice-over urged women to check their breasts for any lumps or abnormalities. Not one station in America agreed to air that commercial. In fact, the first time that commercial was shown on American television was in our documentary.

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> Joe Saltzman

Another problem was that every doctor I talked to said their patients who had had radical mastectomies would never go on camera to talk about their breast cancer. They suggested that putting the women in shadows and disguising their voices might convince some of them to appear on the program. Being a young and cocky producer, I told them it wouldn't be a problem.

All I asked the doctors for were the names of their patients and their phone numbers. I then talked to more than 150 women who at first were reluctant to even see me. But after hours of interviews, every one of them agreed to appear on the program if it would

help to save lives. I finally picked nine women who appeared on the program and who agreed to candidly and without reservation discuss what they had gone through.

One of the women told me, "I'd rather lose an arm than a breast." This so startled me that we looked into America's obsession with breasts. What kind of society would create a situation where a woman would give up an arm rather than a breast if she had a choice? The result of our study became a prologue to the documentary that explored the reasons why breasts are, for many women and men, a definition of sexuality, femininity and motherhood, and how this affects the reactions so many people have to breast cancer and the treatments for breast cancer.

Another major hurdle was persuading CBS that we should show a woman doing a complete examination of her naked breasts on camera so women would not be ashamed or reluctant to do the same thing in the privacy of their home. At first, we got a solid "no way." So we shot the courageous woman who agreed to do the breast examination – Barbara Esensten – two ways: one in a leotard, and one naked. I will never forget the day we shot the self-examination at Barbara's house in her bedroom. There we were, four males – me, Dan who was directing the sequence, a cameraman, and a soundman-- with lights ablaze, and Barbara naked to the waist demonstrating how to do a self-examination when there was a knock on the door and one of Barbara's children opened the door. He looked at all of us staring at him and politely asked his mother what was going on. A very calm Barbara told him that she was busy filming a documentary. He said no problem and left.

"One of the women told me, "I'd rather lose an arm than a breast..." What kind of society would create a situation where a woman would give up an arm rather than a breast if she had a choice?"

Joe Saltzman

When we looked at the footage, Barbara doing the self-examination in a leotard looked obscene whereas the examination showing a naked breast looked normal and natural. Still, persuading CBS to allow us to show the naked breast sequence was a constant battle. While struggling to come up with a convincing argument, I happened to watch a dramatic production on PBS of a program called "Steambath" in which actress Valerie Perin showed her naked breasts for about a second. We then made the argument that if PBS could show a naked breast in a dramatic production, why couldn't we show a naked breast to save lives? We finally won the day and never received one letter or phone call complaining about the self-examination.

CBS, always reluctant to do the show, had one provision that management insisted upon, and that was that we had to get a female actor to do the narration on the program. That seemed easy enough, but because of circumstances beyond our control it became a real problem. We had contacted Natalie Wood, a popular actress at the time, to do the narration and she immediately agreed. What we didn't know was that a well-known Hollywood make-up artist had just died of breast cancer because she refused any treatment that might disfigure her body. We had completed the first half of the documentary which consisted of breast cancer survivors explaining what they had gone through intercut with a woman discovering her lump and going through a procedure. I sent the transcript of the first half of the program to Wood.

What happened next was a horrendous surprise. Natalie Wood read the transcript and became hysterical saying we could not put this on television because it was too frightening and would panic women everywhere. She then called her gynecologist, who had many celebrity clients, and convinced him to help her stop this documentary from ever being aired. She then called all of her friends and told them that they must do everything possible to stop CBS from putting this documentary on television.

In those days, actress Wood had a lot of influence. No matter who we called we got the same answer: Is this the documentary Natalie wants stopped? Don't call me again. Actors Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson were appearing in a dramatic production in Los Angeles and she agreed to see me. I went to the place they were staying and gave her the transcript of the first 30 minutes of the program. Five minutes later, she started screaming and sobbing saying she

could never be a part of this program. Eli Wallach started yelling at me saying, "What did you do to my wife? We have a performance this afternoon. Get the hell out of here."

Dan and I tried to figure out what was going on. We had looked at the first 30 minutes many times and while it was filled with blunt comments that were never before heard on TV, it was moving and in the end very powerful. We finally realized that the problem was that the transcript was cold and stark and overwhelmingly severe and missed the humanity of the women speaking so evident in the video itself. So we resolved that if any other actress agreed to see us, we would show her the first 30 minutes of the program, not give her the transcript.

And it worked. Lee Grant, who was coming off the blacklist, agreed to see us in her Malibu home saying nothing Natalie Wood could say would scare her away from doing the program. We met her at her house, showed her the first 30 minutes, and, in tears, she agreed to do the narration. I'll never know whether she would have agreed to do the show if she only had read the transcript, but we weren't about to take that kind of a chance again. Lee Grant was our last hope.

But Lee Grant had one request. She too had known the Hollywood make-up artist who refused to get treatment because of fear of disfigurement and she insisted that we do an epilogue asking doctors to come up with ways of restoring the body through reconstructive surgery.

You have to understand just what a radical mastectomy – the accepted way of treating breast cancer at the time – is all about. For the first time, we revealed on television that it was not a simple mastectomy where only the breast was removed, but a massive surgical procedure that not only removed the breast, but the underlying chest muscles and lymph nodes. The recovery period could take as long as a year. There were only a few doctors in the United States at the time who advocated a smaller procedure. They were a minority. Most oncologists were against reconstructive surgery since many felt that it would obscure new cancers and create other problems. So when I told the UCLA doctors that I was planning to do an epilogue on reconstructive surgery, they were not happy about it. In fact, the American Cancer Society found out about the proposed epilogue and said it would campaign against the program if we mentioned reconstructive surgery at all in the documentary.

I wrote some copy and sent it to our UCLA physicians who still said we couldn't put that on the air. So I rewrote the copy several times until it was finally, albeit reluctantly, approved. Then I sent it to Lee Grant who said it was acceptable.

It turned out that that epilogue was one of the most important parts of the program because it created a discussion about the subject as thousands of women insisted that it be part of their recovery treatment. Today, a plastic surgeon is often included in the initial operation to prepare the area for future reconstruction, and once insurance companies agreed to pay for the procedure, reconstructive surgery became commonplace.

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>
> Joe Saltzman

In addition, the program advocated a two-step procedure instead of the way it was usually done in the early 1970s – the woman would go under the knife not knowing if she would wake up with just a small bandage (meaning the biopsy was negative and she did not have cancer) or with massive bandages and great pain (meaning that she had had the radical mastectomy). The argument then was that the patient was under anesthesia and that the cancer could be taken out immediately. But the program argued that the biopsy should be done in one procedure, and then the woman could consider alternatives and prepare herself for the next procedure if she had cancer.

Dr. Melvin Silverstein, who was a key participant in the documentary, and other doctors eventually pioneered smaller procedures in dealing with breast cancer that are now commonplace. But in

1973, the year we shot the documentary, the American Cancer Society made it clear that radical mastectomy was the ONLY acceptable treatment for breast cancer and that reconstructive surgery was still in the experimental stage and not an acceptable procedure.

One of the happiest parts of this documentary for me is that most of it is now obsolete. Many of the issues we discuss in this show have long been resolved. I always tell my students that I wish for all of them that they have an opportunity to do a program like *Why Me?* which is credited with saving thousands of lives. The 3M company bought and distributed the program and claimed in its publicity that one out of every 3 women in the Western world saw the documentary. A year later, PBS also broadcast the documentary and in every city the documentary aired, women started doing self-examinations and they flocked to their doctors to order mammographies. For years, everywhere I went, if someone found out I was responsible for *Why Me?* a breast cancer survivor or a relative would come up to me thanking me for saving her life, or the lives of their mother or sister or girlfriend or other significant women in their lives.

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> Joe Saltzman

It turned out to be a privilege to have done a program that at first I was so reluctant to do. This is one of the few times that *Why Me?* will be screened in its entirety on a large screen with an audience. The picture may be a bit faded, but the program is intact and it will be interesting to see how an audience in 2010 responds to a program that was so controversial 36 years ago. *Why Me?* is an old-fashioned documentary in which the word is as important as the picture. There are no fast cuts or short sound bites and you really have to listen to the documentary to get its full value. In fact, CBS Radio ran the documentary in its entirety without any changes at all – the audio soundtrack tells the story with or without video.

The first half contains little narration and lets the women tell their story without interruption. But the second half was constructed to save lives and not to be a creative piece of work. We believed that doctors, patients and experts on breast cancer talking directly into the camera to women watching the show was the most effective way of informing them about this disease and its ramifications. I might also add that Lee Grant was extremely emotional when reading her narration on camera. Again, you must remember these were different times when even talking about breast cancer was an emotional experience.

So here is the hour-long documentary minus commercials. I thank you for coming and I hope that *Why Me?* is as meaningful tonight as it was four decades ago.