

THE FIRST PATIENT  
Q&A With Director Chip Duncan

1. How did this film come about? How did you get into filmmaking?

I've been making documentaries for nearly thirty-five years, but none captured my attention like *The First Patient*. And none took as long to make. We were turned down by a variety of medical schools for at least a decade before the Mayo Clinic School of Medicine said "yes" to letting us bring our cameras into the anatomy lab. There were scores of good reasons to say no - after all, the film has no precedent and we weren't offering the school any editorial or creative input so the risks were high for them. But the Dean and the CEO at Mayo Clinic are both doctors. They know firsthand how important the study of human anatomy is to the success of a young doctor. Ask yourself, who wants a doctor operating on them that hasn't done some practice along the way? No one. And practice, in this case, means dissecting a human body.

For centuries, this class - Gross Anatomy - has indirectly pitted science and religion against one another. That's why the Vatican was thumbs down on human dissection for hundreds of years, that's why several other medical schools said no to us, that's where the taboo comes from. Is it dissection or desecration? Of course, if you are practical, the people we're looking at in the film are dead. Really dead. In fact most of them were on ice for several months prior to the beginning of the class and filming. But these people all willed their bodies to science. They volunteered to give back so students could learn through their death. Their decision is noble. It's graceful. It's important. No one forced them. A lot of us sign our driver's license donating our organs in the event we die unexpectedly - but this is not that different. These donors simply offered up their entire body so students could learn and advance their careers as doctors, nurses, physical therapists and dentists.

This was the most difficult shoot of my career. Navigating the technical issues would make a good documentary on its own. But in my case, I'd already spent several weeks logging time in a few different anatomy labs and I knew the story would be amazing if we could just get in the door. And it really is all about the story. The reason is simple - the film isn't about slicing and dicing and gore, it's about the students, it's about their journey into an unknown world, it's about the way they

confront fear, the way they navigate stress, the way they confront death, the way they learn to work with a team, and the way they learn to redefine the aesthetic of the human body and find those things within us that make us beautiful.

We met the students a week before class began. They didn't know us, we didn't know them, yet we were asking permission to document their journey in the most notorious class in medical school, the class where they confront death for the first time, the class that quite literally is the rite of passage from science nerd or medical wannabe to doctor. If you fail this class you will not become a doctor, it's that simple. The 22 students who agreed to let us film them showed real courage. These are smart young people well versed in the world of social media, they knew better than most of us how mistakes can be amplified by the camera. Yet they showed up every day and let us in on what amounts to an expedition inside the human body. They let our cameras discover each new muscle, each nerve, each beautiful organ as their own discoveries unfolded – and we were able to capture their wonder in a pure documentary style.

There were no retakes, no please move here or lean over there – this film was shot by two guys wearing lab coats, sliding on the same greasy floor as the students, breathing the same putrid air as the students, dodging professors and teaching assistants, seeing things with our eyes and cameras that seemed unimaginable weeks earlier, and listening to the sounds of chisels and bone saws, nervous laughter, and exclamations of pure joy at the discovery of all those internal bits and pieces that make us human. We never interrupted or got in the way of a single student – we simply trusted the process.

## 2. Why did you make this film? What inspired you?

I have a vivid imagination and was haunted by the anatomy lab during my time in college. I used to walk past the lab on my way to my very tame liberal arts classes on the campus at UW-Madison. The lab had a reputation – it was taboo, no one can go in there, and let's face it I thought, strange things must happen in there, things you wouldn't want to see or experience.

Years went by and in 2003, I visited an anatomy lab for the first time with an old

friend, Dr. Tom Borg, who ran a lab in Columbia, South Carolina. I wasn't sure about going inside, but I told Tom I'd go and I'd either pass out OR I'd want to make a film. Needless to say, I didn't pass out. Now, more than fifteen years later, audiences can have the same experience I had in 2003. Believe me, watching the film is worth every minute of your time because the class isn't about dissecting a human body, it's about learning what it means to become a doctor ... and more importantly, it's about learning what it means to be human. Is there any journey more important than that?

3. What things did you find most interesting during the filmmaking process?

When we started the production, I knew from my previous visits to the anatomy lab that we'd be able to entertain an audience (the lab is very entertaining) and, in the least, they'd learn what it means to be a doctor. What I didn't realize - and what really makes up act three of the film - is that our cast of medical students would share their journey as they learn what it means to be human.

The challenges were many. This is not a reality show, these students are not being paid, they didn't audition to be on camera. These are real students with real challenges and very limited time outside of class. We met the students for the first time a few days before the class began, and by the time the class was underway, their daily lives really did consist of the lab and study with a little sleep. For a first year medical student, there is no social life, no outside life at all. So for us as filmmakers, that meant the story we were pursuing was in the anatomy lab.

4. How did the film change from start to finish?

The only significant change from the original concept to the final film has to do with the donors. Having more donor POV would have been great, but on a practical level, no one knows when they're going to die. Donors aren't in any hurry to become donors (who would be) so following a cadaver through the process from their POV difficult to do. I'd welcome another filmmaker to give it a try - it would certainly add to the dialogue - but while we did have access to people who had signed up to donate their bodies, none died during our production. And yes, that's

a good thing in this case. For the 13 cadavers in the film, we were privy to who they were or what they did in life. We only know them as donors.

5. What were the successes that you had in making this film? Talk about the graphic nature of what are seeing and what it was like to film cadavers being dissected.

The biggest success of the film is that the students we followed through the process of human dissection really shared their feelings and their values with us. While I think the film can be seen by anyone of any age, it is graphic. It's not bloody because the bodies have been embalmed - the blood has been removed. But it is also graphic and shocking and entertaining - in a positive way I think - because most of us never get to look inside our bodies. What's in there? What's going on with arm or leg or joint or organ? How does the body work? These are questions we pursue in the film because it's at the heart of the students' journey. And then there's the next phase of questioning - what happens when it doesn't work? We die. What went wrong? Why did this body die? These are equally compelling questions. But the success of the film, in my opinion, is that we challenged these students to think about what the whole thing means - life - what are we? Why do we exist? Where does the soul reside? What makes us what we are?

As strange as it may seem, the more I was exposed to the inside of the body, the more I began to see it as a work of art. I have no idea who designed us - but wow, what ever designed us - wow. And now I understand what may have seemed obvious to some but not so obvious to me: we are all the same inside! We all work the same way. Once the skin is removed, we are unrecognizable, and except for size or gender, we become indistinguishable from another human body. If you're willing to challenge your preconceived notions about beauty, then this journey will knock you out. Because what's inside of us is as amazing as what's outside.

6. What do you want audiences to take away from this film?

This is the kind of film that will inspire friends to gather together after watching it and discuss big philosophical questions. Not questions about dissection; rather, questions about death, about art, about the values we bring to medicine, about the pressure we put on our doctors and nurses and healers to heal us, and about what it

means to be human. The film isn't religious at all, but it does push audiences to consider the big spiritual questions that we all consider around our lives - the most important being: "What are we?"

7. Was there a something special technically that you utilized in making this film - your cameras or sound or editing techniques?

Yes, there were lots and lots of technical issues. We used 7 different cameras with lots of handheld, lots of GoPro, and lots of time lapse. And the sound issues? Wow. The only word to describe sound inside the lab is chaos. There were 12 individual dissection tables with four students per table. Add in 6 teaching assistants and a minimum of 3 professors and there is never a dull moment. And no two tables are in the same part of the process so students at one table may be using a bone saw while students at another are lifting the brain from the skull. I would describe the room as "semi-organized chaos" simply because everyone is encouraged to discover and discovery has its own organic process. Fellow producer/photographer Bob Huck and I roamed the room focused mainly on five tables that featured our main cast of 22. And, as I mentioned earlier, we tried to blend in as much as possible, we never interrupted the process, never touched a light, and we made sure that we the students knew they could ask us to move away at any time. The challenges were many, but those challenges are what make this career a great one.

8. Where do you find inspiration or who/what has influenced you as a filmmaker?

I don't have a favorite filmmaker. But I do have favorite authors, photographers, DPs and composers. In general, I like photojournalism and approach our films with that as a guide. If I was forced to pick one doc maker that I find really solid over and over, it would probably be Ric Burns. There is a moment at the end of *The First Patient* when I thought, you know what, Kurosawa might like this decision. So I went with it and I will defend the three-minute lock down, ground level shot by simply invoking his name. Wait - did I actually say that out loud?