

# THE PACT

## The Behind-the-Scenes Story of Survival, the Streets, and the Power of Commuting, or Just How Many Bricks Did Mickey Mouse Use to Build His House?

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We all know that everything in life, including filmmaking, is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. When we first heard the story of The Three Doctors at a screening of our last award-winning film, *Partners of the Heart*, we were immediately enthralled, but knew that it would be a beast of an experience to produce a vérité-style documentary based in Newark, NJ, from the Spark enclave in Washington DC. Two years and 354 hours of footage later, after literally hundreds of expeditions up and down the East Coast, and with a gang of DV cameras following the Docs all over the country, *The Pact* was completed. That 90% perspiration on this rigorous and intense production was worth it, from both a filmmaking and an aerobic standpoint—90% perspiration over two years increases your stamina and your core strength inside and out.

Here then are some of the more inspiring and perspiring moments of creating *The Pact*.

### MEN IN WHITE

Aliens invade and the Earth is saved by two mysterious Men in Black. Just as unlikely is the story of The Three Doctors, who overcame poverty, criminal records and drug-addicted parents to become doctors. They are...the *Men in White*. That was the original language and title of Spark Media's proposed documentary on The Three Doctors. The title cleverly plays on the double meaning of doctors wearing white lab coats and the subtextual theme of black men in a white society, while also making a pop reference to the Will Smith science fiction movie. Unfortunately, our production team was hit with a reality check when we realized that the very teenagers we are trying to reach with this compelling story were only four years old when that movie came out. Not only were we using an antiquated pop reference that few of today's youth would understand, but we made ourselves feel really, really old in the process. The title was changed quickly.

## MEETING MALIQUE

The most exciting element of vérité filmmaking, as well as the most nerve-wracking, is that you're never sure where your story will take you. The cameras follow the action, and you have to be open to taking all the twists and turns until the story reveals itself to you. Often, veering off the established path is how the most serendipitous moments occur. The best example of this took place one miserably rainy day when *The Pact's* director, Andrea Kalin and crew traveled to a Barnes & Noble bookstore in Newark to record one of The Three Doctors' speaking engagements. The moment is captured in the documentary: The Three Doctors arrive at the bookstore and after giving a short speech, they begin to take questions. One mother raises her hand and describes how the doctors have inspired her son and how he had reminded her every day for three weeks about this event. Beside her, nervously taking notes on index cards on everything the doctors had to say was ten-year old Malique Bazemore. Unwittingly, part of our storyline—and one of our stars—emerged. The doctors were touched by Malique's story and moved by his maturity and dedication to helping his family. Malique also became the film's narrator, reading crucial passages from the doctors' autobiography during key scenes in the film. Still only 12-years old during the filming and with no prior film experience whatsoever, Malique worked for hours trying to get the narration right. At one point, Kalin suggested he take a break and he said, "No. I'm not quitting until I get this right." That rainy morning at Barnes & Noble, the Spark camera crew had a simple instruction—follow the doctors. What the documentary received instead was on-camera proof that the doctors are making a difference.

## THE MYSTERY OF MICKEY MOUSE'S HOUSE

Another serendipitous moment occurred on the streets of Newark. Spark's camera crew was following a group of teenagers through the neighborhood when a woman walked out of a corner store. Once she heard what the documentary was about, she began freestyling advice to the teens.

*The bricks.*

*They gone.*

*The only bricks left is your own house.*

*Is your own house.*

*Like Mickey Mouse built a house.*

*How many bricks did he use?*

*Don't let the streets get your mind confused.*

And then she promptly left, leaving the teenagers and filmmakers more than a little befuddled. This encounter made for one of the more memorable yet hotly debated clips in the film. Her call for the teens to keep their heads is certainly moving and grabs the viewer, but when she evokes Mickey Mouse...well, quite frankly, the crew could not figure out what she meant. Did

Mickey Mouse have a house? Was it in Newark? And if it was, would it really be built out of bricks? Wouldn't it be a castle or a giant steel golf ball rising over the Newark skyline? It took the undiluted wisdom of the 11-year old son of the director to decipher the code—the woman meant to evoke not Mickey Mouse, but the Three Little Pigs. The last pig, having built his home out of brick, was safe from the wolf, i.e. the streets. So the woman on the street was advising that the teenagers do the same. Yet that doesn't change the fact that for months it was her freestyling, and not the streets, that had our minds confused.

## **THE STREETS**

Filming in the city streets poses a whole slew of challenges, especially when you are filming in the streets of Newark. The most glaring example of these obstacles was the 'Case of the Missing Tapes.' After a particularly long weekend of filming, the Spark crew went to grab a bite to eat. When they returned, they realized that their car had been broken into and that all their footage had been stolen. Anger rippled through the ranks of the crew as they fanned out across the neighborhood, digging through trashcans and asking at local pawnshops before rushing to the police station to file a report. In the station, amid a crowd of arrested criminals, mugging victims, and overworked officers, the Spark crew came up with a plan. Kalin's husband faxed over a photograph of a DV tape and the crew created a flyer offering a reward for the missing tapes. Kalin asked if an officer could accompany the crew back to the neighborhood since it was almost 1:00 am. The officer in charge quickly answered, "I'm not going back there. It's too dangerous!" That didn't stop Spark, though. The next hour was spent running through the streets, frantically taping flyers to every phone pole and then dashing back to the car in terror. Unfortunately, the tapes were never found. But if any of you know where they are, I'm sure the reward is still good.

The streets continuously posed a challenge, especially in the tense post 9-11 environment. One afternoon, the crew was filming the Prudential Building from a car when suddenly two police cruisers cut them off. Two more cruisers pulled up right behind them. The police officers singled out each crewmember and said they were going to run a terrorism check. Since they were obviously going to be standing around for a while, Kalin asked if she could keep filming. One of the officers allowed the cameraman to film close-ups of the sirens and other cutaway shots, and asked what the documentary was about. Kalin started to tell him the story when he suddenly interrupted her. "Three Doctors? Like Sampson Davis? I know him! My brother, Reggie, taught him kung fu!" The terrorism check was cut short, and the crew went on their merry way, marveling at the brilliant small world moment that had just saved them a trip to the police station. And pay attention when you're watching the documentary—when you see the fantastic shots of police cars, scanners and sirens, just remember that the footage was filmed while the crew was being detained!

## L.A. CHASE SCENE

One of the most difficult parts of filming this documentary was navigating the three doctors' exhaustive schedules. Even when they were all in one place, it was nigh impossible to keep track of them as they shipped from one community event to another. Case in point: to promote their latest book, the doctors went on a book tour through Los Angeles. The publicist has literally quadruple booked the doctors and the schedule was so tight, that there could be no waiting for a camera crew that was trying to follow them. Even something as small as a trip to the bathroom could result in the doc's publicity train leaving the crew in the proverbial and literal dust. There is a thin line between vérité and paparazzi, but that didn't stop Spark's crew from leaping into their car and literally chasing after the doctors. Breaking almost every law in existence and weaving in and out of L.A. traffic in a frenzied manner that would make Jerry Bruckheimer proud, Spark's crew was able to match the nonstop pace. The L.A. Book Tour resulted in some dynamic footage of the doctors on tour, so the mad dashes were worth it. But try telling that to all the innocent people we almost ran over.

## THE LONG WAY HOME

Certainly the most trying aspect of *The Pact* was the commute and the long distance coordination. Spark Media is in Washington DC, while the doctors were in Newark, NJ. The entire crew was in New York and New Jersey. At the very heart of vérité filmmaking is when the documentary subject calls the director and says, "Hey, I have a community event tonight. Can you come?" Last minute calls are the name of the game and can be trying enough when the filmmakers and the subjects live in the same city. But when you live four hours away, such a last minute call would ignite Armageddon in the Spark offices. There were flurries of phone calls to the crew, to the train station, to the event organizers, to hotels. Staffers ran up and down the stairs from office to office, gathering last minute details and sometimes screaming just because. Headless chickens dashed around the office trying to join in the fun. The long commute continued past filming and into the edit. Kalin assembled a top-notch team in New York, including Emmy-award winning editor Paula Heredia. For six months straight, Kalin would come home to DC on the weekends and then make the long haul back to the New York edit cave during the week. There were many days when after a long night of cutting and screening footage, Kalin would emerge from the edit room and admire the beautiful sunrise over the New York skyline—a small reward for work well done and a peaceful and multicolored reminder that all was well with the world...and then she would turn around and bury herself back in the edit cave for another marathon session. And so it goes.

## **THE PACT**

Filmmaking, whether it be feature film or documentaries, is a collaborative art. The quality of the film rests not in the hands of the one, but in the arms of the many. There were numerous “pacts” in this film-not only the title pact between the Three Doctors, but also the pact between the doctors and their community, between the doctors and the crew, and between every single name listed in the credits. The credit reel is vast and every single one of those people had a vital part to play. Spark Media is proud of this film, and proud of the energy and faith that each of these people put into the movie.

We believe what’s important about a film is not always what makes it to the screen, but the process of making it and what you learn about yourself and others while you’re making it. At Spark, the spirit of collaboration is what governs everything we do, whether it is directed towards making a movie or towards saving the next generation of our children. We should all be inspired together (10% of the time, at least) and if we all perspire together (the other 90% of the time), that is how we make a difference. And that is the true PACT.