

Medicine Men and Women



Art courtesy Mike Mathis Productions

Keck: The Miniseries

Don't look for Richard Chamberlain swashbuckling his way through surgery, but this Discovery Health documentary brings the real-life adventures of USC doctors and patients to the small screen.

You'd never peg Mike Mathis for a Trojan die-hard. A graduate of Occidental College, the veteran TV producer's closest connection to the university is attending the same San Marino church as USC President Steven B. Sample.

And yet, Mathis is the mastermind behind the six-part miniseries "USC Medical" that aired on the Discovery Health channel in April and May, reaching some 40 million American homes.

Had the university purchased six hours of advertising, it couldn't have presented the Keck School in a more flattering light than this documentary highlighting the real-life stories of the doctors, patients and medical students of USC and its affiliated hospitals.

Just how did Mathis, with no direct ties to the Trojan Family, hit on the Keck School for this project? Wanting to model a series after ABC's "Hopkins 24/7" and "Houston Medical," Mathis says he "immediately thought of USC because it's here in the community where I live. It's a huge medical center; it's very renowned and respected. And I knew there were interesting stories at that hospital. I just knew it.

"People go through life and death situations here – hurting people, frightened people, delighted people – all going through these crucial moments. We just wanted to be there with people who were willing to let us tell their stories."

Mathis' instinct was right.

The first episode featured a live-donor liver transplant performed on mother and daughter by USC surgeons Rick Selby and Nicolas Jabbour. It also had a segment on surgeon Melvin Silverstein's compassionate handling of a frightened breast-cancer patient convinced she was going to die. In a later episode, Silverstein himself becomes the patient when he undergoes open-heart surgery to repair a valve. Hours later, he faces a near-death crisis with a ripped aorta – corrected in a life-saving procedure performed by friend and colleague Vaughn Starnes, a cardiothoracic surgeon. In a separate episode, Starnes operates on an hours-old infant born with a heart that only works on one side.

In all, some 30 stories lace through the six one-hour episodes. We see twins diagnosed with retinoblastoma, a rare cancer of the eye; a burn patient's excruciating skin reconstruction recovery; a heart-transplant candidate's anxious wait for a donor organ. Student stories show the hardships faced by Amy, a USC undergraduate living with cystic fibrosis; the strain on Keck first-year students Ebonie Smith and Nohemi Gonzalez as they brace for exams; and the tender relationship that develops between surgical fellows Laura Klein and Lina Romero and their mentor, again breast surgeon Mel Silverstein, who is himself haunted by the drug-overdose death of his daughter years ago.

"There are some very moving stories in the six hours and some heroic doctors and heroic patients," says Silverstein. "I think looking at the six hours will give a lot of people hope."

It took nearly a year to make these six hours of television. Film crews began taping in July 2003. "We filmed almost every day for seven months," says Mathis, whose Pasadena-based production company has made numerous programs for the Discovery networks as well as for the Travel Channel, TLC and HGTV. Before

starting his own production company, Mathis directed episodes of "Unsolved Mysteries" for years.

For this project, Mathis set up a field office at USC University Hospital, where his researchers were sure to bump into physicians.

"After a while, when they passed each other in the hall or rode together on the elevator, the doctors would say: 'Hey, you know this interesting thing is happening tomorrow. Why don't you be there?' recalls Mathis. "Access is everything."

The crews followed the doctors as they made the rounds through USC University Hospital, the Doheny Eye Institute, USC/Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center. When necessary they trailed them across town to USC partner hospitals such as Childrens Hospital Los Angeles.



Baby Kyle

Surgeon John Gross reunites Teresa and Chris Chavez with their baby, who has just undergone surgery to reshape his malformed skull. Had the congenital defect gone uncorrected, Kyle would later suffer brain damage.

Art courtesy Mike Mathis Productions

Whenever the doctors were on duty, so were the filmmakers: "I had several late-night calls from doctors. They'd say: 'Look, right now we're going to harvest a heart. Do we want to be there?' My people would jump out of bed and go," Mathis says.

The result is a more intimate view of the Keck School than has ever before been seen. "These doctors let us right into the operating room. They said, 'Bring the camera in, see what we do.'"

What they do, the producer found, is fascinating. In one episode, we literally watch trauma surgeon Juan Asensio remove a metal shaft impaling a man's leg, then race up the elevator to clamp the bleeding artery of a gunshot victim already in surgery. We see how emergency physician Susan Stone balances a career in the ER with her personal struggle with leukemia. We see orthopedist James Tibone, physician to the Trojan football team, hustle on the sidelines to examine a fresh injury and, later, hustle in the operating room to reconstruct a player's torn knee. We see epidemiologist Jim Dwyer turn himself into a guinea pig after he is diagnosed with a rare cancer for which no known therapy exists.

The key, says Mathis, is just to be there as the stories unfold. "They unfold for us just as they do for the viewer. We're filming what happens. We don't know how it is going to end and neither do the doctors."

"USC Medical" is serious reality-television that takes you behind the scenes. "You don't normally get to see a surgeon as he trains a fellow with her first surgical procedure," Mathis says. "You don't get to watch surgeons give people bad news. Those are dramatic stories happening all the time."

There's no script and no preconceived plotline. Nothing is staged and the stories don't necessarily end happily. "Not everyone that we followed lived," says Mathis. "Then again, there were people who looked like they weren't going to make it who are fine. It's just like life."

Mathis' crews shot hundreds of hours of digital video. Back at the production studio, a wall of bookshelves holds the cassettes, meticulously labeled, logged and transcribed before being transferred to digital editing terminals where the stories were assembled, narrated and scored.

Winning the physicians over wasn't easy. "They kind of eye you," says Mathis, recalling his first meetings. Their skepticism is understandable, he adds. "You're at someone's mercy when you let them film you. If you're a doctor, you've got a career that you spent decades working on. You don't want somebody coming in and trivializing it or misrepresenting it. At the end of the day, trust is everything: trust that you're not just doing a hatchet job."

Filming in deeply private, sometimes life-and-death situations involved a great deal of red tape. Mathis spent four months just getting the ball rolling. "I've never worked on a show that had as many legal issues as this one had," says the Emmy-nominated, 20-year-veteran TV producer and director. Once they had finished negotiations with USC's attorney, he explains, "We had to turn around and do it again with all the different hospitals involved."

That Mathis himself has no background in medicine he considers an asset: "I come to everything like a viewer. I don't know what retinal blastoma is: I have to learn like everyone else," he says. The program's director and camera operators are seasoned medical filmmakers, however: it wouldn't do to have the crew pass out during surgery, Mathis jokes.

The rest, he says, is just follow-through. "Once the doctor says, 'You can come with me and meet my patients and listen to me talk to them,' and the patient says, 'You can come home with me and see what it's like to have a baby with this condition,' our job is just not to mess it up."

– Diane Krieger

The Discovery Health Channel is repeating "USC Medical" on its "Lifeline" series in August. For listings and times, check the cable station's Web site at <http://health.discovery.com/schedule/a2z.jsp>.