

The New Heroes do their work in the trenches

By Jay Bobbin
Zap2it.com

June 28, 2005

One definition of a hero is someone who wants to make others' lives better without thought of profit.

Twelve such individuals are profiled in *The New Heroes*, a four-part PBS documentary miniseries narrated by Robert Redford.

In places from San Francisco to Calcutta, the "social entrepreneurs" have introduced innovations ranging from education for homeless children to bank loans for the impoverished. Affordable cataract surgery and cost-effective water pumps are among other results the program considers.

"Most of these people don't care about being famous," says co-producer and co-director Carl Byker, whose other works include the PBS *American Experience* episodes *Woodrow Wilson* and *The Duel*. "If they cared about that, they'd be doing something else. The promise to them, in participating in this, is that some really bright young kid out there will see there's a different path he can take. There are people who really are making the world a better place."

While filming *The New Heroes*, Byker wasn't a dispassionate observer; he witnessed the rescue of people from a slave camp in India and the introduction of electricity to remote areas of Brazil. "At one time," he says, "I called my wife and said, 'You won't hear from us for a number of days, and I have no idea what is going to happen.' My cinematographer and I were just on a rip-roaring roller-coaster ride in terms of adrenaline, but it's the most worthwhile film I've ever worked on. To be able to use your skills to further such causes is as good as it gets."

The involvement of Redford won't hurt in bringing attention to *The New Heroes*, but Byker appreciated Redford's insistence on the stories being the stars. "He was very worried that the whole thing would be identified with him. He didn't want that, which I respected. These people are such powerhouses, there was no chance that he would overwhelm their stories."

One segment involves David Green, an American who merged his business savvy with the prowess of Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy to give economical eye care to residents of southern India. "I think there are ways to address affordable products in ways that don't affect profitability," Green says.

"It's not so much altruism as whether corporations can use their core competencies in ways

that can improve conditions. My hope is that by watching this program, people will see how they can address the needs of the world without having to compromise profits."

Many other *New Heroes* have become known to Byker, who hopes to make installments about them, too. "What's interesting about the social entrepreneur movement," he says, "is that there are people in the nonprofit world who have Bill Gates-like talent. They are revolutionary thinkers with different goals. Every person I've profiled here could be a billionaire or a captain of industry, but they've decided to leave the rat race and do something really special with their lives."

On TV

Program: *The New Heroes*

Airs: Tonight and July 5, 8-10 p.m. on WXEL-Ch. 42, 9-11 p.m. on WPBT-Ch. 2

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