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Hospitalist Hopes to Build Website Featuring Stories about Delivering Babies in the 1950s

July 29, 2015 • Carol Patton

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When Ruth Ann Crystal, MD, performed her residency at Stanford University Medical Center more than 15 years ago, she often worked side by side in the operating room with one of her favorite professors, Bert Johnson, MD, a skilled surgeon and obstetrician. While performing vaginal hysterectomies, Dr. Johnson would often share stories of when he was a resident back in the 1950s at the Chicago Maternity Center (CMC) and delivered babies for poor families on Chicago's south side.



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One of the stories Dr. Johnson told was about a time when he and another medical student were called to a home to “turn a baby that was stuck,” recalls Dr. Crystal, now a [hospitalist](#) at El Camino Hospital, which supports two campuses in Mountain View, Calif., and Los Gatos, Calif. They were going to administer ether, which is highly flammable, to the young mother to relax the uterus and help turn

A film crew captures Drs. Crystal and Johnson chatting between deliveries at Santa Clara (Calif.) Valley Hospital. Photo courtesy of Dr. Crystal

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the baby, but then realized that a wood fire was burning. As the woman writhed in [pain](#), they doused the flames with water.

"He said it was like Dante's Inferno as smoke filled the room," Dr. Crystal says. "It was quite the scene."

Stories told by Dr. Johnson and other physicians who worked at the CMC during medical school or residency in the 1950s are legendary. They reflect a time in medicine when doctors not only made house calls, but also stayed in the family's home until the baby was delivered, getting glimpses into the life of the poor. In an effort to preserve these stories, Dr. Crystal wanted to produce a one-hour PBS documentary called *Catch the Baby*. But financial realities set in, and she now plans to convert the stories into short vignettes that will be posted on a website by the same name for medical humanities classes.

"I thought, 'Wow, this is an amazing part of history that shouldn't be lost,'" says Dr. Crystal, who also supports a private practice. "The Chicago Maternity Center was an incredible place that, for almost 80 years, taught medical students how to be self-sufficient.

They learned "to count on their own skills and [find] ways of solving problems in very real situations when being sent out to these deliveries."

Big Plans, No Budget

During her residency, Dr. Crystal videotaped approximately seven hours of interviews with Dr. Johnson about his experiences at CMC. She planned to write a book about the 80-something-year-old doctor, who still owns a ranch, ropes cattle, and, at one time, headed the California Beef Council; however, her job, growing family, and well, life, simply got in the way.

Then, in 2009, roughly a decade later, one of her patients mentioned that she knew a film crew who produced documentaries for PBS. Dr. Crystal asked for an introduction.

Members of the film crew were excited about the project. Their first task was to create a trailer for the documentary. They spent an entire day filming Dr. Johnson at his ranch telling stories about kitchen table deliveries in the slums and doing activities around the ranch, like roping cattle with a fellow cowboy—someone he actually delivered as a baby years ago. More film was later shot at the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center of Dr. Johnson performing a C-section and vaginal delivery with a resident and medical student.

The four-minute and 20-second trailer cost \$37,000, she says, explaining that the money was mostly raised through donations from Dr. Johnson's "cowboy friends" who also owned ranches in the area. It is still posted on the original website Dr. Crystal created: www.CatchTheBaby.com.

Now came the hard part—fundraising.

"I found out that I would have to raise between \$650,000 and \$700,000 to make a one-hour film," Dr. Crystal says. "I tried, but I'm a doctor and don't like asking people for money. I realized that probably wasn't going to happen."

But she wasn't willing to abandon the project. So she turned her attention to YouTube, which, by then, had been online for four years. At the time, shorter videos were popular. Dr. Crystal had to develop a new plan.

Her current goal is to build a website that would highlight the CMC stories, which would be part of a medical humanities course at medical schools across the country. Medical students, residents, and other doctors could learn about the history of medicine and obstetrics. She says there are many lessons to be learned that don't involve medical procedures, such as the impact of social and cultural issues on a physician's ability to deliver healthcare.

"We need to look back on the important lessons the medical students learned at the CMC," she says. "Not about how to do specific procedures, but how to interact with patients who may be very different from themselves."

There seems to be plenty of interest in the topic; Dr. Crystal has since built a Twitter following of 5,700 people who read articles she tweets about medicine's past, present, and future ([@CatchTheBaby](https://twitter.com/CatchTheBaby)).

Still, she needs to build the website, edit the hours of film into short films, and then post them on the website with a study guide. The cost, she says, could run anywhere between \$35,000 and \$65,000.

"I don't necessarily have to work with people who are PBS



Dr. Johnson at his California ranch.

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—Dr. Crystal



A teaching moment between Dr. Beatrice Tucker and a resident physician in the 1950s. Notice the baby on the kitchen table and medical student washing his hands in the kitchen sink. Photos courtesy of Dr. Crystal

documentarians,” she says, adding that over recent years she has contacted several university film professors and students who turned down the project because it was too much to tackle. “I’d like to use a crowd-funding [platform like] Kickstarter or Indiegogo to raise the money, so I could edit the film.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Johnson is getting older and would enjoy seeing this project completed. So would his friends who helped pay for the trailer and original filming, says Dr. Crystal. Besides, she believes these stories can help new doctors better balance their focus between [technology](#) and face time with patients.

“Medical school education is changing quite a bit,” she says. “Despite advances in technology, we can’t forget we’re treating a human being first.”

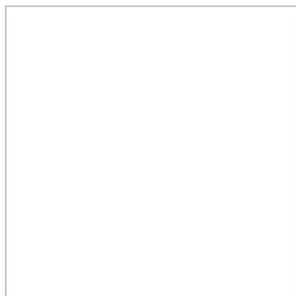
Carol Patton is a freelance writer in Las Vegas.

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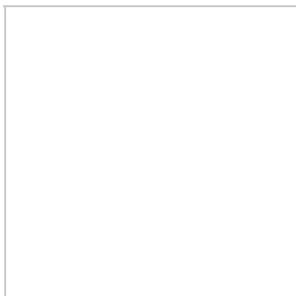
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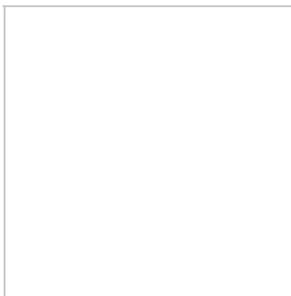
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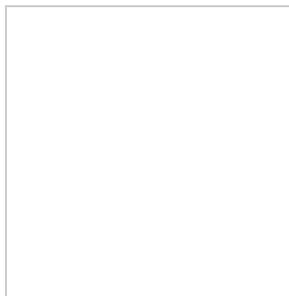
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