



## Healing US: Uniting across the political spectrum to save lives?

***"This should happen. It can happen and in order for it to happen, it requires that we, the American people, join hands across the political spectrum and across the states and we demand that we get health care."** Maddy Purves*

*911. What's your emergency?*

*America's healthcare system is broken and people are dying.*

Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we shine a light on America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host **Brenda Gazzar**.

*(music)*

This time on **Code WACK!** How did the new documentary **Healing US** about the drawbacks of America's for-profit healthcare system get made? And which harrowing stories did they highlight and why? To find out, we spoke to documentary filmmaker **Maddy Purves**, who is editor of the film, and **Laura Fielding**, founder of [Red Berets Medicare for All](#) and associate producer of *Healing US*.

***Welcome to Code WACK! Maddy and Laura!***

**Purves:** Thanks for having us.

**Fielding:** It's great to be here.

***Q: Great to have you both. So Maddy, let's start with you. Tell us a bit about yourself and how you got involved in the documentary Healing US.***

**Purves:** I am a documentary filmmaker, and I had gotten in touch with the director, Kenny Ballantine, who knew kind of that they wanted to do a story about then it was mostly the cute little old people, and they're not really old – that just adds – who were knitting Red Berets for health care in Washington. And I was very interested. We were also talking between us on making a film about, the title is pending “Without Cops” so it was a policing or anti-policing documentary. And a subject that kept coming up in working on that film was health care. Of course, communities need healthcare <laugh> or they don't, you know, they're not happy. And they turns out a lot of 'em ended up in prison that shouldn't. Kenny and I met because we are both ex-Mormon, frankly, and my dad reached out on a Facebook group, and said, ‘my daughter needs work <laugh>. Does anyone hear her in film and have things going on?’ Kenny responded, and we met and just fell in love as a work partnership. So here we are.

***Q: So interesting. I love that. And so, Laura, you're featured in the documentary as the founder of the Red Berets for Medicare for All. Tell us a little bit about yourself and how did you come to be a single-payer healthcare activist?***

**Fielding:** My roots go back to when I was a military spouse. I was an active duty veteran, served my time and then lived overseas in the UK with my husband who was stationed there. That was the foundations of my activism because so many of the people that I was working and going to school with said, ‘Laura, how can you stand to serve a country that leaves so many people behind? We hear all these horror stories about people that don't have health care, and it's just a tragedy.’ So that really affected me because I wasn't aware really at that time about the horrors of the system because I grew up in a middle-class family and we had health care at least as far as I was concerned. That was not something that I was aware was affecting so many people and then I had heard Bernie Sanders message about Medicare for All and felt really, really inspired that maybe I could get involved.

And through the seeing and the knitting of some of the Pink Hats, I thought maybe we could do that for healthcare justice. I started thinking because of my military background that a beret would be, we needed to be loving and connective and also the National Nurses United were a big piece of that inspiration because of, you know, Bernie and the nurses speaking. And I had heard them speak and thought

maybe we could knit in National Nurses red, and it should be a beret because we need to be a bit militant, obviously <laugh>, but in a loving and interconnected way for healthcare justice.

***Q: So The Healing US documentary argues that it's time to change America's for-profit healthcare system. I really like how this film makes such a complicated issue understandable. How did this film get made and why is this issue so important now?***

**Purves:** Kenny went out to Washington to interview and also film The Red Berets doing their thing... And prior Laura had called the digital masses and had arranged I think a dozen interviews for Kenny upon Kenny arriving in Washington, which was not part of the original plan, but it was Laura thinking, this person's voice needs to be involved. Among those was Scott Desnoyers who was actually the first interview Kenny did that day.

And that interview where Scott tells his story about losing his son, Danny, showed in the film was the first one done that day. So Kenny had to kind of wipe the tears and get back to it. And immediately upon doing all these interviews with Steve and Leah Perkel with many of the other Washingtonians it just became very clear very quickly that this was a larger scale thing. And it wasn't just about the specific group of craftivists in Washington. It was much more than that And there was a pull there of talking about healthcare as an American thing, as an interstate thing, as a uniting thing. And I'm speaking for Kenny here a lot because Kenny's the director, but I can relate. I don't have any kids, but I also don't have a doctor.

I don't have a dentist. I need health care. Right. I go to 1-800-CONTACTS instead of an optometrist and so in terms of the question of why is this issue so important, it affects everybody. Everybody has a body – whatever that body looks like, it needs attention and it needs love and care and in our country, our bodies are receiving less attention and care than other countries and the only reason why that is the case is because it is a for-profit system wherein the people who are supposedly the care providers, often have ulterior motives and financial profit making incentives to provide that care. Even if at heart they don't want that to be the main incentive. Doctors and nurses and physicians, how many of these people that we know in our lives really have the best of intentions and their hands are tied, as Dr.Dooley says verbatim in our film.

Ultimately a film needed to be made and it was made with Kenny and I who as just everyday Americans are feeling that need and neither of us, thank God, have yet lost a loved one because of the negligence and the lack of care in our healthcare systems. And we felt that was important in crafting the film to focus and center on

those human stories of Danny and Shalynne and some of the other people whose families aren't involved, but people, you know, like Wendell Potter talks about Nataline Sarkisyan. I've never met this woman or her family, but her death impacted now hundreds of people. So that's a very long-winded way of saying it was time that a film like this be made and it be made by – trying to sound humble as possible – the right people with the right intentions at heart of we need this in our country and a film is the right way to present these stories to actually get an argument that this should happen. It can happen. And in order for it to happen, it requires that we, the American people join hands across the political spectrum and across the states and we demand that we get health care.

***Q: And just to remind our listeners, we did interview Scott Desnoyers a couple years ago about Danny, his son, who missed a \$20 premium insurance payment that he didn't know about. And because of that he couldn't get his medication for his mental health condition and ended up killing himself as a result. And the father Scott has become a Medicare for All activist. And Nataline Sarkisyan died, a teenager, after the insurance company denied a liver transplant. Her very sad stories that were included in this film and very powerful stories. The story about Shalynne is also very moving. What can you tell us about that story and why you started with it in the documentary?***

**Purves:** That was a question. I think that Kenny and I anticipated getting a lot more than we have... We both felt very strongly that it needed to open with a strong story. It was between Amy and Shalynne and Scott and Danny. We wanted the whole film to be opened and the tone set by the gravity of the situation, which is human loss and in the end, we chose Amy because her delivery was just so raw. ... And I don't usually break down, but in her telling the story I was just in tears and trying not to, you know, just behind the camera picks up sounds, right. And I was trying so hard also not to make her try to console me, right? 'cause I'm just a camera person and this is her freaking crazy life story. All of that is context in the editing room. Her story just landed still and we wanted audiences to continue the rest of the film with that as the preface and that as the underlying theme of this is a life and death case scenario.

Like, there is no excuse really in Shalynne's story. The way she talks about her leg, it was swollen, she said she was in pain. She said she stayed and she kept asking and asking, 'no, please help me.' It's also very poignant and we ended up including her film as the first instead of Danny's because she was a woman of color. And we don't spend hardly any time in the film talking about race and health equity but that is such a major player and it just adds, this is an American story and sets the tone.

***Q: So Shalynne was a 22-year-old Black woman who according to her mom died in part due to a misunderstanding about her health insurance. What can you tell us about what happened?***

**Purves:** Well a lot of the story's in the film, but essentially Shalynne had a torn ACL and there was a blood clot and long story short, she got on an airplane. She shouldn't have, but she went to the doctor before getting on the airplane and asked for care and they turned her away because when they asked her, do you have insurance? That was the first thing they asked. She, I think inaccurately, said no.

***Q: Wasn't it at a hospital that she went to?***

**Purves:** I think it was urgent care or something like that. And even then they shouldn't ask about insurance and they still did and it was pretty much on every case. You know, she shouldn't have gotten on a plane with a blood clot. They should have checked her anyways. And there's just so many things that went wrong that shouldn't have gone wrong.

***Right. Right. And so ultimately she didn't get the care she needed. She didn't even get the MRI she asked for, and she ultimately died.***

**Purves:** It wasn't even an MRI, it was just an ultrasound which is I don't know the exact dollars and cents, but cheaper than an MRI <laugh> the hospital she went to and refused her, could have done this in a space of a few hours and prevented a life being lost. But instead she went through a lot of pain. She went on a plane, came back and landed, she was in the second destination for 12-24 hours and increasingly in pain, increasingly to the point where she was no longer receiving oxygen 'cause she had such a large clot. And it was a very traumatic way to go that again, didn't need to go that way.

***Q: Right. What do you think this says about our healthcare system today?***

**Purves:** I think it says a lot <laugh>. I think you know, that it's very easy to, in this story point the finger at the hospital and the specific nurse or admin who did not admit her. And even then, I have to say, they may have had any other things going on. They may have not had enough beds or overmatched their quota and maybe they were getting pressure from their superiors to stop admitting people, you know, that were just faking it or, you know what I mean? That even the providers are skewed, that that provider was not thinking help the person at any cost they were thinking and including the measure of cost in how they helped people. It's a case in point, costs should not be a factor in administering care.

***According to KTNV Las Vegas, Shalynne did leave with an X-ray, a leg brace and several prescriptions for pain. The hospital also said in a statement that it doesn't require insurance before rendering treatment and that her status played no role in the care and treatment she received.***

***Q: Thank you for that Maddy. The documentary notes that roughly 68,000 Americans will die this year due to lack of adequate health care and nearly half a million families will file for bankruptcy due to healthcare costs. Numbers like these are mind boggling. But these individual stories like Steve and Leah Perkel's story really bring these statistics to life. What can you tell us about Steve Perkel's case?***

**Purves:** That story continued even after the documentary ends. They had more and more bills after the procedure that Steve ended up getting, which was a quadruple – landed a quad. I can't remember what the quad stands for, but <laugh> Laura, maybe you might know more than I do.

**Fielding:** The thing that really hits me about their story right now in the moment is that as they mentioned in the film, they were already involved in the cause. They were already actively out in the Medicare for All movement, being activists and advocates for people to have healthcare justice in this country. Sorry, I could come to tears with this. Though they were already doing the good work of trying to make sure people had health care and then this story you know, of how medical bankruptcy and getting underneath medical debt happened to them. So I guess it sort of strikes me as a beautiful tribute to people that are out doing this work who are affected by it even as they're trying to do the work of healthcare justice. So that's really what I want to say about Leah and Steve and I'm really happy they came up.

***Yes. And just for our listeners Steve was having a heart attack at a public meeting and had just closed his eyes. His wife and son thought he was sleeping when in actuality he suspected he was having a heart attack. He didn't say anything until he got home because he was thinking, we can't afford a hospital bill. I don't want to deal with medical debt that we would be facing if we go. But he finally tells his wife and she convinces him to go to the hospital. They call 911 and the cardiologist at the hospital says 'we can't worry about cost right now. You're going to die if you don't have this procedure.' And so he had the procedure, it did save his life, but then they were stuck with I think a hundred, about \$140,000 in medical debt in hospital and ambulance bills that they're still dealing with.***

***How tragic that that's the first thing so many Americans think about when something catastrophic happens. Can I afford to be treated? That really stuck with me.***

Thank you Maddy Purves and Laura Fielding of the Healing US documentary. Stay tuned next time when we continue our discussion with Maddy and Laura about the film Healing US and the best solutions to fix our broken healthcare system.

***Do you have a personal story you'd like to share about our 'wack' healthcare system? Contact us through our website at [heal-ca.org](http://heal-ca.org).***

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