

***La Americana*. Documentary Film. Written and directed by Nicholas Bruckman. Bolivia/USA: People's Television, 2008. Run Time: 65 min**

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Maria del Carmen Rojas:

“The American dream is a theory. In reality it doesn't exist.”

### **The Accident**

Carla Rojas was only 9 years old when she was hit by a bus coming home from school. As a result of the accident she was left paraplegic, confined to a wheelchair, and in need of much more medical care than her mother could ever afford. No matter how hard her mother worked, she could never earn more than \$100 per month in their home country of Bolivia—not enough to pay for health care even the poorest country in South America. As a result, in 2000 after being denied a visa Carla's mother, Carmen, decided to try to emigrate illegally into the U.S. so that she could work for a period of time and send money back to her

daughter, who stayed in Bolivia under the care of her grandmother. Carmen traveled from Bolivia to Tijuana, Mexico, first and from there crossed the border into the U.S. by hiding in a car.

### **In America**

Carmen makes her way to New York City where she takes as many jobs as she can: cleaning houses and offices, shampooing and walking dogs. She joins the 11 million illegal immigrants living and working in the U.S., saving money to send back to the place where her heart remains. Carmen talks on the phone frequently with Carla, and Carla begs her mother to come home. Carmen thinks about going back to Bolivia to visit her daughter, but finds out that if she were to be caught doing so without a valid visa, she would not be allowed to return to the U.S. for 10 years. Carmen ultimately decides that that is a chance that she cannot take and vows to stay in the U.S. and work for 6 years, until Carla's fifteenth birthday. The viewer sees and sympathizes with Carmen's struggles with this decision throughout the film. Several times Carmen says, “I would have liked to have been a really good mother.” But to counter these feelings of regret she consistently reminds herself that she needs to get medical care for Carla, and she also needs to be able to leave Carla an

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inheritance because her father is not part of the family, and Carla will not be able to provide for herself. The film exposes not only Carmen's internal struggle about staying in the U.S. to make money, but also her struggle to understand why U.S. immigration policies do not welcome people like her ("We're the ones that take care of your children and clean your house"); why "God Bless America" is a song that seems to only apply to North America ("I am American too"); why the U.S. is seen as the land of opportunity and freedom when not everyone has the opportunity to live freely and openly ("Freedom is not for people without papers, and we are many"); and, why American citizens do not reconcile their prejudice with the fact that they themselves descended from immigrants just like Carmen.

### Return to Bolivia

Carmen does in fact return to Bolivia in 2006 in time for her daughter's fifteenth birthday. The film shows some moving scenes, such as when mother and daughter are first reunited at the airport after having not seen each other for 6 years, and when mother and daughter are going to the zoo together and trying to get to know each other again after having been apart for so many years. However, the happiness does not last long as Carmen discovers how bad Carla's medical condition is in reality and therefore how quickly the money is running out. Carmen takes Carla to a physical therapist who informs her that Carla's hip has been broken for years from a botched repair by a chiropractor. Further, he says that Carla will need physical therapy for 5 days a week for the rest of her life and that without it her condition is degenerative. Carla also needs her bed sores treated and a lifetime supply of diapers. Carmen becomes overwhelmed with the financial, physical and psychological factors that are required to care for her child and the film ends with Carmen thinking once again about risking her life and wellbeing to return to the U.S. to earn more money.

### Reflection

The film raises the general ethical issues of the right to health care, but more interestingly, as a movie with an emphasis on cultural interactions and national

health policies, it raises the more specific issue about the right to health care as a civil right versus a human right. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, proclaimed that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of oneself and one's family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care." Several physicians and academics have argued that health care is indeed a human right. For example, founding director of *Partners in health*—an international organization that provides health care to people living in poverty—Dr Paul Farmer believes that it is. However, he admits that

The fight for health as a human right, a fight with real promise, has so far been plagued by failures. Failure because we are chronically short of resources. Failure because we are too often at the mercy of those with the power and money to decide the fates of hundreds of millions. Failure because ill health, as we have learned again and again, is more often than not a symptom of poverty and violence and inequality. (Farmer 2008)

This raises difficult ethical questions. Even if health care is a human right, whose obligation is it to provide it? And what are our moral obligations in cases where the obligated entity (for example, a country's government) fails in those obligations? The U.S. is a country that is still undecided on health care obligations to its own citizens (with the exception of The Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act of 1986, which entitles all people to emergency care regardless of financial or citizenship status); the question of health care obligations to citizens of other countries is seldom on the radar.

Of course, the film raises ethical issues much broader than bioethical ones. For example: the reasons people emigrate; the difficult individual moral choices they make, such as the forced choice between spending time with one's children and providing for one's children seen in this film; and the moral difference between commission and omission. One thing is certain, this film puts a human face on many ethical issues tied to a failing health care system at the global level, and so it is a very valuable resource that is bound to stimulate a lot of thought and discussion among college students and professionals alike. It is also bound to help people become more compassion-

ate and less judgmental. In that regard, the film is a valuable resource for every U.S. citizen, and especially those who are in the position of making policy decisions about health care access and immigration, and those who deal with enforcing such decisions on a daily basis, such as Immigration Office personnel.

## References

- Farmer, P. 2008. Health is a human right. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98460202>. Accessed January 11, 2009.
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