

CBS' '48 Hours' to air young journalists' documentary on a Utah militia

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They call themselves VJs _ though they're not MTV video jocks. Instead they're the fresh young video journalists of Broadcast News Networks in New York City. They're a new breed of scrappy reporters who shoot their subjects with small, silent digital video cameras, letting events play out naturally, breaking barriers between subject and viewer _ blending themselves into stories too.

At 10 p.m. Wednesday you'll see their hip handiwork on ``48 Hours'' in a telling one-hour documentary called ``Birth of a Militia.'' An expanded three-hour version will air at 5 and 8 p.m. Oct. 31 as part of documentary series ``I Witness'' on CBS cable channel Eye on People.

``Birth of a Militia'' explores the lives of a small group of armed white racists in La Verkin, Utah, who call themselves the Rocky Mountain Militia. The Southern Poverty Law Center estimates there are about 380 such militias in the U.S., Rather says.

This ``Militia'' is also about Sheriff Glenwood Humphries, who tracks the militia, and BNN VJs Amanda Pike, Craig Santy and Lara Hughey, who spent six weeks shooting the sheriff and militia leaders Johnny Bangerter and David Dalby, their friends and families, earlier this year.

``This new technology is an equalizer,'' Pike, 26, said recently from New York of her guerrilla-style Sony VX 1000 camera. Diminutive digital video equipment has been available in the U.S. for about a year and a half.

``Sure we changed the story some by being there, but not nearly as much as a traditional news crew with lights and a sound man,'' Pike said.

``With digital you don't need a lot of money. You don't need physical strength or several crew members to help you. The camera is an idiot camera. All you need is the passion for the story.''

You see Pike's passion early on in ``Militia," when Humphries suddenly, inexplicably, asks her on-camera if she wants to shoot his gun. Pike, who has never fired a gun before, hands Humphries her camera so he can tape her shooting. It's the ultimate TV news turnabout, a daring one.

``We knew we wanted to be very honest about showing what we do to get the story, to demystify it," Pike said. ``We just didn't know how we would do it until that moment with the sheriff. When I handed him the camera a lot of power went with it."

As the program progresses Dalby and Bangerter talk about their white racist, survivalist and anti-government philosophies. They recruit new members. They order uniforms. They eye the skies for spying FBI helicopters and play with their kids. We see them get ever more paranoid about a perceived impending raid by federal agents. Dalby kicks the VJs out of his house as he packs to move his family to an isolated secret location _ which he later lets the VJs visit.

``First there was distrust that the media would distort their message, then it became `You guys aren't media, you're federal agents poised to take us down,' " Pike said. ``Then we were the media again. It was a fine line, keeping our distance and sanity yet not burning our relationship. It was a delicate balance."

The Rocky Mountain Militia wanted only one thing from BNN. All participating BNN crew would have to be white.

Over six weeks white VJs Pike, Santy and Hughey shot about 150 hours of videotape, working with a production assistant and an editor ensconced in a makeshift ``war room" in La Verkin. The VJs thought militia members would be reluctant to express racism on camera. They were wrong.

In a chilling on-camera scene, Bangerter's youngest sister Mary Lynn Seamens, traveling in a limo to appear on ``Geraldo" with their mother, unflinchingly tells the unsuspecting driver ``We support like local militias and things, and uh _ we're racists."

``They really wanted to say it, to hammer their philosophy home," Pike said.

``But the most interesting moments came when philosophy time was over. We tried to keep the cameras rolling as much as possible. When David's daughter asks `What's that, Daddy?' and he says `Oh those are Bible study tapes and those are bullets' _ we could never have scripted it.

``Digital technology lets subjects get closer to you. When they forgot we were there we had those intimate moments."

Actually, this off-the-cuff intimacy, shot verite style with jerky camera moves, looks no different than ``Homicide" or ``NYPD Blue." Except it's real.

Wednesday's broadcast is also a smart cross-promotion for the ``I Witness" series which debuted Aug. 22, created by BNN president Steve Rosenbaum, and for Eye on People. As part of the plug CBS press releases and ``48 Hours" host Dan Rather repeatedly stress how young the BNN VJs are. BNN boasts about 30 staff, most in their 20s or 30s.

``Well, that means we get paid a lot less," Pike said, only half-joking. Born in San Diego, Pike graduated from Columbia University in 1995 with a masters in broadcast journalism. She previously worked for small-format production company VNI (Video News International) in Philadelphia (now NYT Television in New York).

``I guess we probably do bring a different kind of energy to the show being younger. It helped us with the militia members 'cause they all ended up being our age, in their mid-20s. Granted, we came from amazingly different backgrounds, but that may have given them something to relate to."

Still, Pike was spooked at times.

``It only takes a few passionate believers. The Oklahoma City bombing _ not to compare, of course _ only took two people. It's almost a self-fulfilling prophecy when these militia members get so concerned that the government is poised to take away their First and Second Amendment rights and take their kids away."

Bangerter's sister Barbara Bailey did have two of her children taken away by her ex-husband, by court order _ because of her racist views, she says on camera. ``And there was the on-going tension of wondering `Am I white enough?'" Pike said. ``I'm half-Italian on my mother's side, a little dark-skinned. I never usually think about it.

``And we did worry that cars were following us, that someone would knock on our door and demand the film. They knew what hotel we stayed at."

Pikes fears did not pan out.

And she doesn't feel ``Militia" gives this small band of extremists a louder voice than it deserves.

``Any time you do a powerful story you wonder `Am I informing or am I exploiting?' But if we censor unpopular stories then we would be paralyzed as a press. As a journalist I believe knowledge is power. To understand these people you must give them voice."

48 HOURS: BIRTH OF A MILITIA

10 p.m. ET Wednesday

CBS

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