BY LISA HORAN

# Transit authorities

## Video unit documentary chronicles 9/11 aftermath

You're undoubtedly familiar with the heroic efforts of New York City police, fire, and rescue personnel in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC). Of all the stories that resulted from the event, these were the ones that generated some of the most widespread media attention.

There was, however, a story about another group of heroes that escaped significant media coverage: the employees of MTA New York City Transit. *Above and Below: NYCT Responds to 9/11*, is a one-hour documentary produced by NYC Transit's video production unit that chronicles the critical, albeit largely overlooked, role transit workers played in the hours, days, and months following the attack on the World Trade Center.

From helping to move thousands of people out of danger areas above and below ground, to manning "bucket brigades" to remove debris from the scene, to transporting NYPD and FDNY personnel to and from Ground Zero and operating heavy machinery that cleared paths for rescue personnel, transit employees indeed were involved on levels that far exceeded their daily responsibilities.

### The Transit Connection

"There was someone from Transit involved in the coverage of the World Trade Center disaster from the very moment the story began," said Winston Mitchell, producer/director of *Transit Transit News Magazine*, the monthly, half-hour television newsmagazine produced in-house at MTA NYC Transit. Mitchell, who

had dropped off a friend at a meeting on the morning of 9/11, watched from his car as the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, just 100 yards away from where he sat.

With more than two decades of television news experience in his background, Mitchell's first response wasn't to flee, but to call his office and get patched into local news. In fact, it's Mitchell's live, eyewitness account as heard on NYC's ABC News affiliate (and later CNN) that opens the documentary.

From there, the program takes viewers on a riveting and often emotional ride that tracks the work of transit employees and the people they assisted during and following the disaster. Hosted by acclaimed actor/writer/director Ossie Davis, who volunteered his time for the project, *Above and Below* features a compilation of new footage and footage shot originally for *Transit Transit.*

"Our cameras were actually the only ones allowed underground in the subway system, so all the preliminary footage of damage to subway tunnels that was seen was shot by us," said Mitchell. "We had access that even FEMA did not have."

Some of the most emotionally-charged footage in the documentary features reunions of transit employees with the passengers they helped to rescue. "We received dozens of letters from passengers who wanted to thank the transit employees who assisted them on 9/11," explained Mark Groce, who, along with editing the documentary, also set up many of the reunions.

From the story of a bus driver who led pedestrians to his bus by the sound of his voice, in spite of the massive black cloud of dust and debris that had begun to envelop them, to the story of a train operator who stopped at a platform directly below the World Trade Center to pick up a crowd of terrified passengers, even though smoke had begun to pour into the tunnel and he was instructed to "get out of there," the documentary highlights examples of transit employees who went beyond the call of duty.

"It was very rewarding to know that bus and subway operators didn't abandon their posts, even though their lives were clearly in danger, but rather helped save the lives of the people they were hired to serve. It made me proud to be part of the organization," said Groce, who also serves as MTA Transit's public relations spokesperson.

Another little known fact noted in the documentary: NYC Transit employees were able to transport more than 300,000 people out of the vicinity surrounding the WTC and bring them to safety on 9/11. "Many people don't know this," Groce said, "but we didn't lose one train, one bus, or one employee or passenger that day, which is quite a testament to the commitment and bravery of our employees."

Transit Transit News Magazine *is a monthly program that showcases NYC Transit personnel and activities.*

## Pick Up The Pieces

Though much of the footage had already been collected for episodes of the series, putting the documentary together was no less complex. "Our goal was to have the video run as if in real time, so the biggest obstacle we faced in the editing process was editing the footage together in precise chronological order and in a way that made sense to viewers," explained Groce, who said it took roughly three weeks to finish the project.

In addition to collected footage, which was shot in both Sony Beta SX and SP, the documentary also features original interviews with transit employees and officials, state authorities (including Governor George Pataki), and passengers, along with additional footage showing the restoration of collapsed subway tunnels.

To add effect to already dramatic footage, Groce, who edited the piece on an Avid Xpress, used straight cuts along with some fades. An additional dramatic element came in the form of music. "We did take some music from a music library, but we also had musicians come to the studio and write and record original music as they watched the documentary," said Groce. "It worked out incredibly well and really underscored the emotion of the piece."

Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of the documentary is that it doesn't merely focus on the destruction that took place on 9/11, but also highlights the rebuilding process from a transit perspective. "NYC Transit transports over 2 billion people a year, so the first priority

*(Left to right) Winston Mitchell, Mark Groce, Chris Abramides, and Ozzie Cruz shoot* Transit Transit News Magazine *which covers a variety of transportation topics.*

was to get trains and buses going again as quickly as possible," explained Mitchell.

Though the transit portion of the restoration project was expected to take several years, it was completed in just one, and the documentary features footage of the effort. "The documentary shows scenes from the round-the-clock operation of workers digging out and rebuilding sections of tunnel and track under the World Trade Center that were damaged in the collapse," said Groce, who shot a good deal of the footage. "The restoration of this track, which carries the 1/9 line, was completed on Sept. 15, which is nothing short of miraculous considering the extent of the damage."

At press time, the only station that had not been reopened was the Cortlandt Street Station, which is directly under the Ground Zero construction site. Crews continue to work at the site, and transit officials believe the job will be completed in the near future.

## A Strong Foundation

Since its completion in September, the documentary has aired on every cable television station in the New York tri-state area. It will also be featured in four New York museums as part of their permanent exhibit collection of the events of 9/11.

The staff of MTA NYC Transit's video production unit is no stranger to large audiences. *Transit Transit* reaches 22 million homes and can be seen every day of the week on either the local PBS affiliate or one of the cable television stations that carry it. Originally created in 1994 as an employee communications device, *Transit Transit* has ballooned into a general interest program that has gained recognition and notoriety throughout the region.

Unlike similar newsmagazines, *Transit Transit* not only includes feature stories and news, but also showcases several entertaining characters who provide information on transit-related trivia, history, and even science. One of the regular segments of the show, for example, is "Professor Putter," which features a zany professor who walks the streets of New York with an artifact from the transit museum and asks people if they know what the artifact is.

"We've done a lot of different things on the show and covered a wide variety of stories," said Mitchell, who has previously worked as a photojournalist for ABC and CNN and as the director of operations for Reuters Satellite News. "We've profiled transit employees who were formerly on Broadway, for instance, and have taped the show from a variety of interesting locations. Our studio is the streets of New York."

With a permanent staff of three, in addition to an intern and several volunteers, the video production unit at MTA NYC Transit has gained quite a reputation around the New York Tri-State area. Each year, more than 100 people show up to audition for volunteer reporter openings on the show, which has garnered a number of awards, including a Hometown Video Award, a Telly Award, and a NATOA award for the "Number 1 Show in Area Municipal Programming" for the past four years. *Transit Transit* has also been nominated for a Cable Ace Award.

Awards and experience aside, nothing could have prepared members of NYC Transit's video production unit for what they would see through the lens on 9/11 and the days to follow. "I've been in the news business for over 20 years, so I've seen plenty of death and have gotten rather immune to it," said Mitchell. "I don't know if it's because I witnessed this event as a civilian, or if it's because of the location and magnitude of the devastation, but covering this story was different from any other I'd done before. This one was personal." ■

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