

THE CENTRAL CHARACTER IN THE BATTLE OVER IMMIGRATION

In his first attempt at making a video, **Charles Ommanney** broke most of the rules of documentary filmmaking, and ended up winning honors for his portrayal of the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico. **BY HOLLY STUART HUGHES**

AN EXPERIENCED photojournalist and former *Newsweek* contributor, Charles Ommanney had never shot any video before he pitched MSNBC an idea for a multimedia piece—combining video, stills and recorded interviews—about life along the U.S.-Mexico border. “I hadn’t even turned on the video button of my DSLR,” he says. *The Fence*, which was published in three parts on MSNBC.com last summer, won 2nd prize for long feature at the World Press Photo Multimedia Awards. *The Fence* breaks many of the conventions of a video documentary: Ommanney’s interview subjects rarely appear on camera; their words are heard over the footage and stills he shot. Rather than shooting sequences that combined footage of action with B-roll, Ommanney shot long takes of the subject that is central to the film: the barrier wall that now spans about 700 miles of the nearly 2,000-mile border. Cutting across deserts and backyards, the snaking fence is a monumental presence in all the

footage Ommanney shot and in the stories he gathered. Editor Andrew Hida, who had the task of shaping Ommanney’s sound and visuals into three coherent pieces, says of *The Fence*, “In a way it’s a character-driven narrative, but the main character never speaks.”

Ommanney had pitched his former *Newsweek* colleague, Richard Wolffe—now executive editor at MSNBC.com—on an idea to talk to people near the U.S.-Mexico border about the issue of immigration reform. With Wolffe’s approval, Ommanney recalls, “I flew to Texas in January of 2014, and then drove in an old car from Brownsville all the way across [the] country, keeping as close to the U.S. border as I could until I got to Friendship Park near San Diego.” As he talked to people, however, he decided the story was not about immigration but about the impact of one measure taken to stop it. “It’s about the absurdity of this fence that’s been built for millions and millions of dollars

that’s doing absolutely nothing,” he says. Since construction began in 2006, the barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border has cost \$3 billion, and in some spots there are gaps 15 miles wide. Ommanney shot video of the fence while driving along in his car or after stopping to set up a tripod. In some footage, he shows the fence stretching across vast, inhospitable terrain, but he notes, “The fence is stopped for golf courses because high-paying golf club members didn’t want to see the fence.”

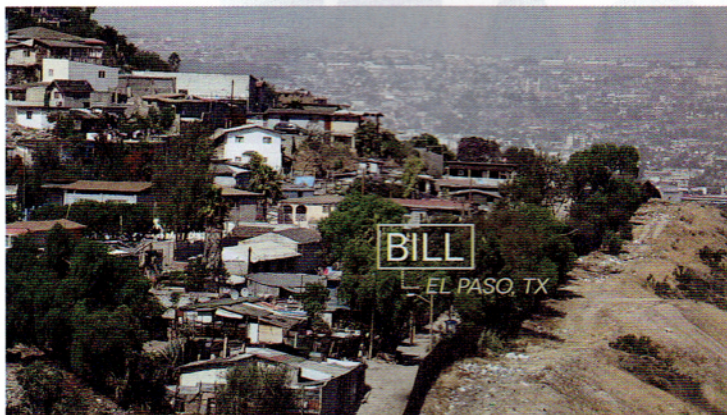
Soon after he arrived in Brownsville, he met and interviewed a man on Boca Chica Beach who sits and watches for immigrants. But he’s not a vigilante: He told Ommanney that one day while camping he encountered “one of the prettiest women I’ve ever seen,” who said she had walked across Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico and was planning to walk to Florida. In hindsight, he regretted he hadn’t asked her to marry him; he now watches each day, “hoping it’ll happen again,” he told Ommanney.

Other people Ommanney met in his travels referred him to other subjects. He conducted interviews with a diverse group of people, including an environmentalist concerned about the fence’s effect on natural migration patterns; a clergyman near San Diego who ministers to families divided by the fence; and an Arizona man who, while hiking, had come upon the body of a young woman who died crossing the border, inspiring him to research her identity and the story of her



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LEFT: After an initial trip gathering video, stills and audio along the fortified fence that runs along the U.S.-Mexico border, Charles Ommanney got permission to spend time with border patrol agents at work near the fence.



ABOVE: Ommanney chose to record all his interviews off-camera to keep the visual focus of the video on the fence itself, but as their voices are heard on the soundtrack, they are identified on screen. Editor Andrew Hida says Ommanney's technique allowed him the "poetic liberty" to use the interviews as voiceovers that provide "a guided experience along the fence."

perilous journey. Ommanney notes, "One of the arguments against the fence is that it just makes people walk miles out of the way into remote areas where they die of dehydration."

He conducted his interviews off-camera, inside the quiet of his car, using a Røde microphone and Zoom H4N sound recorder he had purchased before his trip; he also bought a Zacuto eyepiece and an MD filter for his camera. "I didn't want talking heads in my film," he explains, and says that letting the viewer imagine what the speakers look like "keeps you more interested, I think." It also prevented any one subject from dominating the documentary, keeping the attention on "the central character" of his piece, which he calls "this serpent that runs across the country."

Working by himself, Ommanney often felt frustrated "juggling such different media." He says, "I'd be recording sound and then cursing myself for balling it up." After recording what he calls "the best interview of my life," he drove to a motel for the night, checked his gear and discovered he had forgotten to turn on the "record" button. In the morning, he drove back and re-did the interview, "but it wasn't the same."

After two and a half weeks on the road, he had a lot of material, but decided he needed more information about the border patrol agents. He spent weeks seeking permission, and in May returned to Texas to spend time with border patrol agents, shooting stills and footage when they rounded up several young men who had tried crossing the border near McAllen, Texas.

In June, he reviewed his roughly eight hours of footage and 3,500 stills with Andrew Hida, the editor MSNBC had suggested. Ommanney had envisioned the film as a

10-minute piece, but MSNBC insisted on showing it in three short parts to maximize viewership. "I fought that," says Ommanney. "I said no, you're going to water it down or weaken it." MSNBC wouldn't budge, so he outlined for Hida some themes that each chapter could highlight: the social cost, the economic and environmental cost, and alternatives suggested by people along the border who feel the fence is both a damaging presence and ineffective at stopping people hoping to reach the U.S.

Ommanney felt the story of the man on Boca Chica Beach watching for his future wife made a natural, attention-getting opener to the piece. He and Hida agreed to end the third chapter with words of hope, spoken by the pastor in California who leads weekly worship for people standing on both sides of the fence, and says he looks forward to the day the wall comes down.

"I loved some of those stories people shared with Charles," Hida says. "Anyone can relate to them, even if you don't live in El Paso or near the border."

Hida organized Ommanney's stills using Adobe Lightroom, and used Adobe Premiere to review video and audio clips. Then he began looking for similarities in the visuals, and organizing clips that shared similar themes.

Ommanney's shooting method presented "both an advantage and a challenge," Hida says. Not having to match audio interviews with footage of the subjects gave him "the poetic liberty" to show any footage he liked while using the testimonials as voiceovers that provide "a guided experience along the fence." He notes, however, "Editors love sequences and love details," and his job is easier when directors shoot scenes in a logical order: "You shoot tight, medium, wide,

and then you move," Hida says. Ommanney "definitely broke that rule," he says. "He shot video [clips] like a photographer shooting stills: They're static, the light is gorgeous, they're composed very deliberately." When he first saw Ommanney's footage, he recalls, "I said, 'Oh, man there are no sequences.' But the way we ended up structuring the project, it didn't matter."

Ommanney says, "People seeing it have said, 'That's a great picture' and I say, 'Actually that's not a still, that's video.'" That similarity made it easier for Hida to interweave stills with moving footage without jarring breaks. Hida says, "I like to use two or three still images in a sequence. It allows the viewer to settle emotionally and it helps to smooth the transition."

To introduce each chapter, Hida cut one short intro that would "engage the viewer in the first 10 seconds."

Hida's first cut hit most of the points Ommanney had wanted, and they continued to make adjustments. Though it was Ommanney's first time editing video, Hida says, "Charles was good at articulating visually what he had issues with and where he wanted to try something different."

Though he had balked in the beginning, Ommanney says the three-chapter structure worked, "and people really did watch all three."

Despite the accolades *The Fence* has received, Ommanney has not yet shot another video. Still, he says he's pleased with his first effort, and what he learned from the experience. "As much as it was amateur hour, I found it invigorating and freeing," he says. While handling all the tasks on his own was challenging, it was an experience he valued. "The solitude of being out in the wilderness was very special." **pdn**