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Brothers in Strife: Compadre

By Amber Benham

What does it mean to call someone a brother? This question resonates with Swedish director Mikael Wiström after having befriended Daniel Barrientos, a strong-willed man who struggles against polio and the severe poverty that threatens his family in Lima, Peru. Over the course of his more than 30-year friendship with Daniel, whom he calls hermano, Wiström is met with the challenge of understanding how much responsibility he must take for the inequality in the two men’s lives. Compadre is the second of Wiström’s films to document the extraordinary poverty faced by the Barrientos family.

During his travels to Peru in 1974, Wiström met Daniel and Nati Barrientos living with their daughter Sandra on a rubbish heap in Lima. Seventeen years later he returned to film his documentary The Other Shore, which captures the plight of the Barrientos family’s continuing their fight for survival against extreme poverty. In 2003, Wiström travels to Peru to film Compadre, but this time he encounters a second generation of the Barrientos family as they come into their own battles. Well into adulthood the Barrientos children must now ask themselves what they are willing to do to overcome the poverty that plagues their family.

Sandra, eldest daughter of Daniel and goddaughter of the director, ultimately decides to flee Peru with her husband and child in search of a better life in Brazil. Meanwhile, the younger daughter, Judith, realizes she cannot bear her marriage to Alfredo, a man she likes but is not in love with. She accepts that she is with him simply because he supports her financially. Unlike Sandra, she chooses to escape her marriage by moving in with her parents and beginning her adulthood older and somewhat wiser.

During his last visit to Peru, Wiström confronts a painful reality: He lives in a far more luxurious world than that of Daniel and Nati. In a heated discussion between Wiström and Daniel, viewers witness the emotional tension between the two friends when Daniel angrily halts filming, demanding that Wiström pay for filming privileges. Breaking with the tradition of documentary filmmaking, Wiström includes footage of himself sobbing and rehashing this conflict with Daniel’s wife a few days later.

As tension in the Barrientos family rises, Wiström takes the family on a journey to the village in the Andes where, many years before, Daniel began his difficult life. The trip proves to be an emotional journey for all the travelers, and it gives Daniel the opportunity to show his children how far the family has come. He shows them the dirt patch of ground where he once slept and begins to
weep as he recalls the lonely nights he spent crying himself to sleep.

Although Wiström began his career as both a writer and photographer, he eventually turned to film in order to capture what words and still images could not. By alternating between portrait-like close-ups of Daniel’s family and wide-angle shots of the vast, Peruvian countryside Wiström amplifies the isolation and despair of a family living in extreme poverty. When contrasted with the empty images of the slums of Lima, the faces of the Barrientos family represent the wealth of character found in the people who fight harsh poverty every day.

The general sentiment at the end of *Compadre* is one of optimism. Nevertheless, the film is not a happy one, and its intimate portrayal of a family’s struggle to survive in the face of extreme poverty poses a great deal of discomfort for viewers. Within this discomfort lies a very real, very dire problem that merits the attention of viewers around the world. With good reason *Compadre* was awarded the Terre des Hommes prize at the 2005 Human Rights Film Festival in Paris.

As similar films that seek to highlight the enormous disparity of wealth in the world, *Compadre* tugs at the heart and makes the viewer wonder why some people have so little. More importantly, the film demands that we all question the moral, or fraternal, obligation we have to help our brothers and sisters.