

Using the film as a teaching tool to visually inform recruits about the dangers of stereotypes

The chill of a cold Los Angeles night lingers among the flashing lights and traffic stalled by the discovery of a dead boy, laying among the dirt and weeds on the side of the highway.

Two detectives trying to reach the scene are rear ended by Kim Lee, a Korean woman trying to reach her husband in the emergency room. Lee angrily yells that the female officer whose vehicle she hit is at fault for the crash.

“Stop in the middle of street! Mexicans! No know how to drive! She blake too fast!” Lee yells.

Stunned, Officer Ria defensively replies, “I blake too fast? I sorry, you no see my blake lights,” making fun of the woman’s broken English. “See, I stop when I see long line of cars stop in front of me,” she continues. “Maybe you see over steering wheel, you blake too.”

By nature of the job, law enforcement officers daily become referees in confrontational situations just like this one. Seeing people at their worst is nothing new. But preparing officers for that challenge has not always been easy.

That’s why the Lexington Division of Police began using the 2005 Oscar-winning film, “Crash,” as a teaching tool to deal with these sensitive issues.

“Crash” is a 122-minute film of vignettes, woven together through characters who literally crash into one another leaving no one unscathed. Director Paul Haggis artfully constructs confrontations

in which the characters perpetuate stereotypes, racism and inhumanity, allowing the audience to see where their ignorance leads them.

As recruits, deputies and officers are taught to make observations and be suspicious in a pro-active approach to prevent criminal activity. These observations sometimes become prejudices – and those prejudices can become racial discrimination in a matter of moments when a situation on the street turns ugly, said Lexington Division of Police Lt. Gregg Jones.

The confrontation between Lee and Officer Ria is the opening scene of “Crash,” during which the tone is set for the rest of the film. Snap judgments and harsh words lay the groundwork for tragic, horrifying and heart-wrenching encounters.

The audience later learns Ria is sensitive to being labeled as a Mexican because her parents are >>

Crash of cultures



/Photo by Lorey Sebastian

◀ Gun store owner (Jack McGee), Security Guard (Jayden Lund), Farhad (Shaun Toub) and Dorri (Bahar Soomekh) argue in an early scene of *Crash*. A misunderstanding arose between Farhad and the store owner because of language barriers. ▼ Peter (Larenz Tate) and Anthony (Chris “Ludacris” Bridges) try to pawn off the Lincoln Navigator they stole from a wealthy white couple and ultimately used to run over a Korean pedestrian.

>> from Puerto Rico and El Salvador. “Neither one of those is Mexico,” she says. Lee’s racist remarks only make a bad situation worse.

Following the opening crash, the audience is flashed back to the previous day, where the 36 hours leading up to the wreck begin to unfold. The following are a few representative examples of scenes used by Jones to illustrate bias-based policing during a recent presentation of the film.

Intolerance

A Persian man, Farhad (Shaun Toub) and his daughter are in a gun store, talking with the store’s owner about the purchase of a .32 caliber handgun. Farhad fears for his family’s safety and wants the gun to protect them, despite his daughter’s concerns about his use of the weapon. The owner asks Farhad what type of ammunition he wants.

Understanding little English, Farhad asks his daughter, in a language foreign to the store owner, “What did he say, ammunition?”

The two innocently begin a conversation about what kind of bullets he needs when they are interrupted by the store owner, who angrily spouts off with, “Yo, Osama, plan a jihad on your own time. What do you want?”

The insult infuriates Farhad and the two begin yelling at each other while the store

owner calls for security. Farhad tells the store owner he is ignorant.

“I’m ignorant?” the store owner yells. “You’re liberating my country and I’m flying 747s into your mud huts and incinerating your friends – get the f*** out of my store!”

The store owner apparently didn’t know (or didn’t care) that Farhad was Persian and not responsible for the 9-11 attacks. All he cared to see was a Middle Eastern man speaking a foreign language in his store, trying to buy a gun. He drew assumptions that Farhad was going to use the gun for terrorist activities and was angered that Farhad was speaking a language he couldn’t understand. His anger about the terrorism that has occurred on American soil and his fear that the gun was going to be used to harm more people incited his impatience for Farhad.

Farhad was angered by the store owner’s discrimination because that inequity, hatred and fear of his appearance was the very reason Farhad was buying the gun in the first place.

Bigotry

Anthony (Chris “Ludacris” Bridges) and Peter Waters (Larenz Tate) emerge from a restaurant where Anthony feels he has been discriminated against.

“Did you see any white people in there

waiting an hour and 32 minutes for a plate of spaghetti?” he asks Peter.

Anthony and Peter begin walking down the sidewalk as Anthony continues to complain that the waitress’ purportedly-poor service was a result of their color.

“We’re black, and black people don’t tip,” Anthony says. “So she wasn’t going to waste her time. Now somebody like that, nothing you can do to change their mind.”

“Well, how much did you leave?” Peter asks.

“You expect me to pay for that kind of service?” Anthony replies.

Peter laughs, realizing Anthony personified the very stereotype he complained about by not tipping the waitress. The two continue walking toward a well-dressed white couple, Jean Cabot (Sandra Bullock) and her husband, Rick (Brendan Fraser). Jean notices the men and snuggles closer to her husband – a subtle action that offends Anthony.

“Did you see what that woman just did? ... She got colder as soon as she saw us,” Anthony tells Peter.

The two continue to discuss that Jean’s reaction is unnecessary, given that they are in a safe, well-lit, “white” part of town.

“Yet this white woman sees two black

guys who look like UCLA students strolling down the sidewalk and her reaction is blind fear? I mean look at us, dog, do we look like gang bangers? No. Do we look threatening? No. Fact, if anybody should be scared around here, it’s us. We are the only two black faces surrounded by a sea of over-caffeinated white people, patrolled by the trigger-happy LAPD. So, you tell me, why aren’t we scared?” Anthony asks.

“Cuz we got guns?” Peter replies.

“You could be right,” Anthony says, as the two pull guns from their coat pockets and proceed to hi-jack the Cabot’s Lincoln Navigator.

A second time, Anthony perpetuates the stereotypes that anger him. He can’t understand Jean’s reluctance to continue walking toward him, but immediately confirms her fear by holding a gun to her head to steal her vehicle.

In a new scene, the director takes the audience to the Cabot’s home, where Jean is

still reeling from the theft and becomes more irritated when she realizes the man her husband hired to change the locks on their home is Hispanic.

“I would like the locks changed again in the morning,” Jean tells Rick. “And you know what, you might mention that we’d appreciate it if next time they didn’t send a gang member.”

“A gang member, what, you mean that kid in there?” Rick replies.

“Yes. The guy in there with the shaved head, the pants around his [butt], the prison tattoos,” she says.

“Those are not prison tattoos,” Rick says.

“Oh really? And he is not going to sell our key to one of his gang-banger friends the moment he is out our door?” Jean asks.

Rick continues trying to calm her down to no avail.

“I just had a gun pointed in my face.” Jean continues. “And it was my fault because I

knew it was going to happen. But if a white woman sees two black men walking toward her and she turns and walks in the other direction, she’s a racist. Right? Well I got scared and I didn’t say anything and 10 seconds later I had a gun in my face. Now I am telling you, your amigo in there is going to sell our key to one of his homeys and this time it would be really great if you acted like you actually gave a [crap].”

The result of being attacked and thrown to the ground while her car was stolen caused Jean to take more stock in her prejudices. It is clear from her Hispanic maid that under normal circumstances, Jean would not respond to the locksmith, Daniel (Michael Pena) with such antagonism. She is ignorant to the fact that Daniel is a sensitive, family man with a 5-year-old little girl waiting for him at home. She doesn’t know that when Daniel gets home, he will find that little girl hiding under her bed because she is scared of bullets coming through her window. Or that Daniel moved his family into a good neighborhood >>



/Photo by Lorey Sebastian



/Photo by Lorey Sebastian

◀ Cameron Thayer (Terrence Howard), Officer Ryan (Matt Dillon) and Christine Thayer (Thandie Newton) have a confrontation after Ryan pulls them over in a traffic stop. Ryan ultimately molests Christine Thayer during this confrontation. ▼ Christine Thayer and Officer Ryan are brought back together when Thayer crashes her Jeep and Ryan is the only person who can save her from the impending flames.

>> to protect them from the kind of people with whom Jean assumes he associates himself.

Because Jean is yelling loudly, Daniel hears the things she says about him, but does not respond. He simply finishes his job and silently lays the Cabot's new keys on the kitchen island next to where Jean is still seething. Little does she know that Daniel is the only character in the movie who when provoked, simply walks away from those who abuse him because of his heritage.

Rick Cabot deals with the night's events differently. In his living room, while talking with his staff, the Los Angeles district attorney is concerned that news of the car jacking will affect his upcoming political campaign. Without regard for the other ethnicities in the room, Rick begins thinking out loud about how to neutralize the situation.

"Why do these guys have to be black?" he yells. "Why? No matter how we spin this thing, I'm either going to lose the black vote or I'm going to lose the law and order vote. What we need is a picture of me pinning a medal on a black man. Bruce, the firefighter, the one who saved the campers up in Northridge, what's his name?"

"He's Iraqi," Bruce replies.

"He's Iraqi. Well he looks black," Rick says.

"He's dark skinned, sir, but he's Iraqi. His

name is Saddam Kahum," says Bruce.

"Saddam. His name is Saddam," Rich says. "Oh that's real good, Bruce, I'm going to pin a medal on an Iraqi named Saddam. Give yourself a raise, will ya?"

Rick is still angry that his wife has accused him of not caring, and sets out to prove to the voting public that he does care by attempting to "pin a medal" on a black man. Not only does his logic not make sense, but he shows no concern for the black woman in the room who works closely with him. He also shows he cares nothing for a person's ethnicity when he still wants to pin the medal on the firefighter, simply because "he looks black." He further shows his prejudices when he becomes angered that the black-looking man he wants to pin's name is actually Saddam.

Rick's prejudices are blatantly obvious, even while he attempts to hide them. In contrast, Jean's attempts to hide her prejudices is what she believes ultimately leads to her attack by black men like those Rick wants to portray as heroes to protect his campaign. The prejudices spin the couple in circles and get them nowhere.

Injustice

A new set of characters are introduced in the next scene where Los Angeles Police Officer John Ryan (Matt Dillon) is on the phone with a customer service representative for his fa-

ther's HMO plan. Ryan complains that his elderly father is in pain, he can't sleep and the doctors covered by his HMO aren't helping to his satisfaction. When he doesn't get the response from the representative he wants, he asks to speak to her supervisor.

"I am my supervisor," she replies.

"Yeah, what is your name?" Ryan asks.

"Shaniqua Johnson."

"Shaniqua, big [freaking] surprise that is," Ryan replies, only to have the phone hung up in his ear.

Angry that the woman (whom he assumes is black based on her name) won't help his father, Ryan gets back in his police cruiser with rookie officer Tom Hansen (Ryan Philipe) and hears a call about the Cabots' stolen Navigator. About that time, Ryan observes a black SUV drive past him and begins to follow the vehicle. Hansen objects that it can't be the right car, but noticing a black driver and his wife participating in sexual activities while driving, Ryan proceeds to pull over the vehicle.

The well-to-do couple is laughing about the stop when Ryan asks for Cameron Thayer's (Terrence Howard) license and registration. After Thayer's wife, Christine (Thandie Newton), tells the officer Cameron is a Buddhist and doesn't drink, Ryan still insists Cameron step out of the car and perform

field sobriety tests.

Angry, Christine opens her door, insisting again that her husband doesn't drink.

"Ma'am, I'm only going to tell you one time to stay in the vehicle," Ryan tells her.

"Ma'am," Christine responds, taking offense to Ryan's choice of words. "Don't you ma'am me. Who the hell do you think you're talking to?"

To Ryan, the term "ma'am" is a common, polite way to address a woman whose name you do not know. But to Christine, the same word carries negative, racial connotations.

Cameron tries to calm his wife and explain his position to the officer, but the anger Ryan carried into the situation from his confronta-

tion with the black HMO representative and Christine's disrespect pushes him to force them both against the vehicle to be patted down. Christine continues to yell, telling the officer and his partner she and Cameron have done nothing wrong. Ryan forcibly pushes Christine against the car and she responds by calling him a "pig."

The name-calling further angers Ryan, who while patting down Christine abuses his power by molesting her in front of her husband. Matter-of-factly, Ryan explains during the molestation that he can choose to let the couple go with a warning or arrest them both for reckless driving and lewd conduct.

Feeling trapped by Ryan's authority, Cameron chooses to do nothing and asks the offi-

cers to let the couple go with a warning while Christine cries silently. Later, when the couple argues about the incident at home, Christine questions Cameron's manhood and his "blackness" because he chose not to respond aggressively to the gun-toting officers.

"Maybe I should have let them arrest your [butt]," Cameron tells Christine. "I mean, sooner or later you've got to find out what it is really like to be black."

"Like you know," she says. "The closest you ever came to being black, Cameron, was watching 'The Cosby Show.'"

"Yeah, well at least I wasn't watching it with the rest of the equestrian team," he fires back. >>>



/Photo by Lorey Sebastian



“Yeah, you’re right Cameron, I’ve got a lot to learn,” Christine says. “Cuz I haven’t quite learned how to shuck and jive. Let me hear it again? ‘Thank you mister po-lice man. You sho is mighty kind to us po’ black folk. You be sho to let me know next time you want to [molest] my wife.’”

Redemption

Officer Ryan is distraught about his father’s pain and discomfort and he is angry that he has no control over fixing it. His racial biases come out first against the HMO representative and then again against the Thayers. Because of his power as an officer, he is able to take advantage of the Thayers – trapping them by the authority he holds over them, just as the HMO rep has done to him. But his anger and prejudices blind him from seeing the irony of what he is doing.

He doesn’t think about the repercussions his illegal and disgusting assault on Christine might have – until he faces her again the following day.

Arriving on the scene of another highway crash, Ryan runs toward the mangled vehicles. The front end is on fire in one. In another, gas is leaking down the highway toward the flames from the Jeep, now lying on its top.

Surveying the wreckage, Ryan realizes someone still is inside the Jeep and begins working to free her. Unable to open the car door, Ryan crawls in through a broken window, and as the woman turns her head, the two recognize each other. Christine begins crying harder, thrashing violently.

“No, get away from me!” she screams, still suspended by her seat belt. “Stay away from me! Not you. Not you!”

Realizing how close the vehicle is to exploding, Ryan tells her he is only trying to help, but she doesn’t care.

“Not you, somebody else. Anybody else,” she cries.

“I’m not going to [freaking] hurt you,” Ryan yells, trying to get her attention. “OK? I am not going to touch you. But there is nobody else here yet and that’s gasoline there. We need to get you out of here right away.”

Needing his help, Christine stops yelling and allows Ryan to reach across her to cut the stuck seat belt. But the gasoline finally reaches the fire in the other car and the blaze races back toward Christine’s Jeep. Ryan’s fellow officers begin pulling at his legs to remove him from the car, leaving Christine still trapped inside. But this time, Ryan fights free and dives back inside the car to grab her, instructing the other officers to pull them both from the vehicle now engulfed in flames. He saves her, just before the vehicle explodes.

A little redemption is earned for Ryan’s character, who shows that when Christine’s life is at risk, it doesn’t matter that she is black. It doesn’t matter that she hates him, curses him or fights him. It matters only that his job is to protect, serve and uphold the sanctity of human life. And when he is tested in the direst of circumstances, that moral ground prevails.

Recognition

Luckily, Ryan was able to help Christine even after their initial encounter, but only because Christine had little choice in the matter. After watching the movie and talking about some of these issues, Lt. Jones asked the recruits, “What happens if you demonstrate biases? What are your chances of helping?”

Jones hopes that using the film will help the recruits answer this and other questions about sensitive situations they may encounter.

Jones had taught biased-based policing courses to recruits for some time before introducing “Crash.” But since including the film, Jones said he has seen great benefit come from using the scenarios in the film to allow recruits to express opinions and cultivate discussion from matters that are not personal.

“Officers will be exposed to a variety of ethnicities, races and complicated and tense situations like those that are depicted in the movie,” he said. “The ability to talk through these scenes may bring some recognition out that, yes, we do have some biases to some extent. Many or all of us do. We may not recognize those within ourselves. That is probably the premier advantage of this movie, to bring about dialogue.”



MOVIE DETAILS

A Lions Gate Films production
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Directed by Paul Haggis

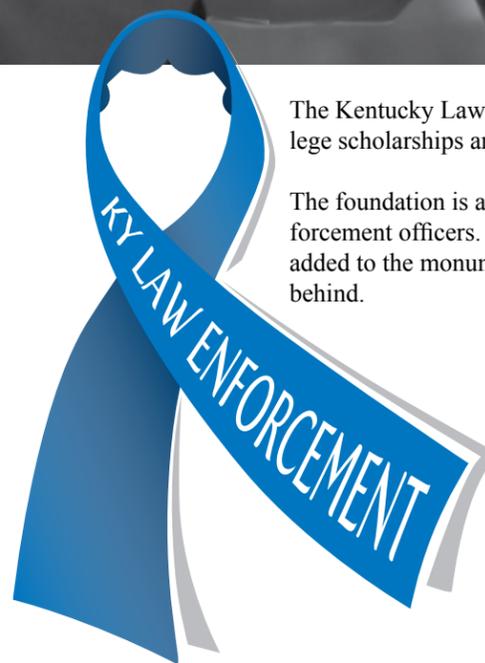
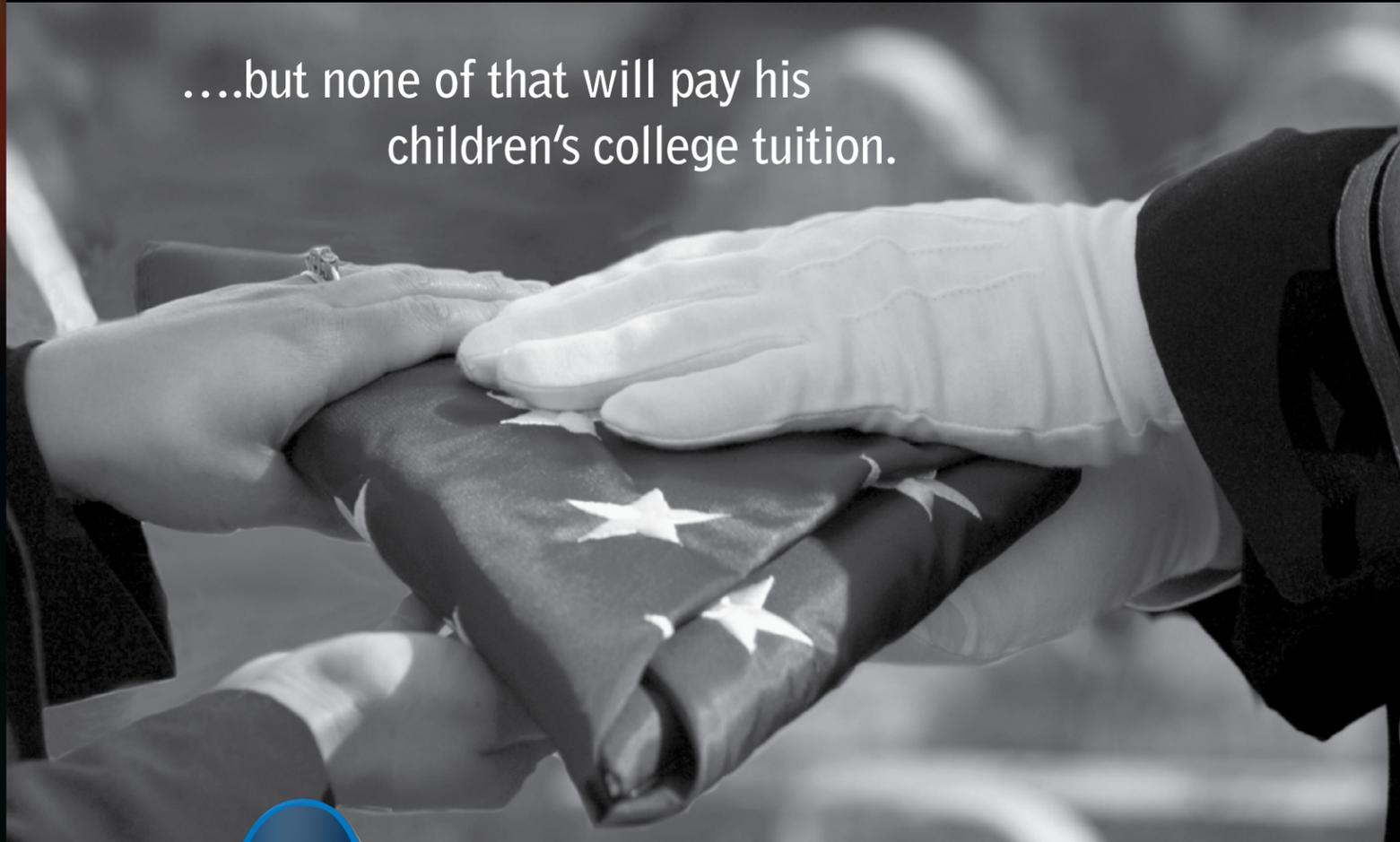
Winner of three Oscars for Best Motion Picture of the Year, Best Writing and Best Achievement in Editing

LEADING CHARACTERS

Sandra Bullock – Jean Cabot
Don Cheadle – Officer Graham Waters
Matt Dillon – Officer John Ryan
Jennifer Esposito – Officer Ria
Brendan Fraser – Rick Cabot
Terrence Howard – Cameron Thayer
Chris “Ludacris” Bridges – Anthony
Thandie Newton – Christine Thayer
Ryan Phillippe – Officer Tom Hansen
Larenz Tate – Peter Waters
Michael Pena – Daniel
Loretta Devine – Shaniqua Johnson
Shaun Toub – Farhad

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