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The Bartender Who Rescued America

By Marty Kaplan

Scott Prouty buried his lede.

That's journalism jargon for not recognizing the most newsworthy part of a story — for delaying the real attention-grabber for later. (Calling a story's first words the "lede" instead of the "lead" is a beloved fossil from the days when typesetters used lead — the metal — to put space between lines. No wonder newspapers' bottom lines are hurting.)

Prouty, we learned last week, is the 38-year old bartender who videotaped the $50,000-a-plate Boca Raton fundraiser where Mitt Romney wrote off 47 percent of the country as victims.

It's plausible that footage cost Romney the presidency. It validated his biggest perceived weakness — his image as a cartoon plutocrat, Mr. Moneybags, the Bain guy who fired workers and saddled companies with debt, the country club Republican who called sports "sport" and didn't have a clue about how ordinary Americans were hurting. Romney tried to counter that image: he wore jeans, reminisced about shooting varmints and had country western stars in his corner. He wanted swing voters to believe that his sucking up to his party's resentful right was just an obligatory primary-season performance, and that as president he'd govern from the middle.

Scott Prouty's tape revealed that the regular-guy stuff was the real performance — play-acting for the rubes. There he was in a roomful of millionaires, caught in the act, dissing half the country as dependents on the public teat. The contempt for working stiffs wasn't caricature; it was character.

Prouty didn't shoot the video because he wanted the goods on Romney. He was just making a souvenir, like his pictures of Bill Clinton shaking hands with the staff at another event. It was only when Romney talked about going to China to buy a factory "back in my private equity days" that he knew he had something explosive on his hands.

Romney told the room that the factory employed 20,000 young women in their teens and twenties, living 12 to a room in triple bunk beds, 10 rooms sharing one little bathroom, working long hours for a "pittance." The factory was surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers. "And we said gosh, I can't believe that you, you know, keep these girls

in. And they said, no, no, no. This is to keep other people from coming in. Because people want so badly to work in this factory that we have to keep them out."

What galled Prouty was that Romney bought the lie. He told the story not to condemn slave labor, but to say how lucky American are to be born in a land of so much opportunity that we don't have to stop people from scaling walls to get work.

Looking around the room, Prouty saw that none of the guests were appalled. He thought it wrong that only people with $50k to shell out could see the real Romney. Afterward, searching online, he learned that the factory was Global-Tech in Donguan, and that Charles Kernaghan, an international labor rights activist, had exposed Bain's interest in ventures built on outsourced American jobs and exploited workers. Two weeks later, when Prouty decided he'd be a coward if he kept what he'd seen to himself, it was this story alone that motivated him to go public. China, not the 47 percent, was his lede.

He posted the China clip on YouTube, under a pseudonym, and began using social media sites to link to it. His goal, as he later explained, was to have the China clip pop up whenever someone typed "Mitt Romney" into Google. He also contacted *Mother Jones* reporter David Corn, who'd written about Bain's forays into China. Enterprising reporters from BuzzFeed and Huffington Post managed to track Prouty down. But it was only at the end of August, when Prouty posted the clip of Romney saying that 47 percent of Americans were freeloaders, that the video began to catch fire. Corn was the first to get the full 68-minute tape from Prouty, and when he ran with excerpts on September 17, "47 percent," like the Occupy movement's "1 percent," became an indelible part of the American political lexicon, and arguably changed the course of the race.

By remaining anonymous until he went on MSNBC's *Ed Show* last week, Prouty ensured that the story would be about Romney, not about the motives of the man who made the tape. What was striking about his media appearances was how important it was for him to keep talking about China and Kernaghan's work for the Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights. Prouty now faces right-wing derision, and he's worried about the legal defense costs he may incur. But his courage caught the attention of United Steelworkers president Leo Gerard, who offered Prouty a job. His goal is to go to law school and fight on behalf of ordinary Americans like himself.

But it turns out that the Scott Prouty tending bar at that Boca fundraiser was not an ordinary American. Yes, he was struggling to make ends meet, and he had no health insurance and no car. But going public with the video was not, he said on the *Ed Show*, the only "incredibly brave or incredibly stupid thing I did"; there was also the time in 2005 — "one of the proudest moments of my life" — when he saved a woman's life. She had driven off Florida's I-75 into an alligator-invested canal. Prouty, who was working in a nearby Honda dealership, ran to help. He dove into the water, and with a co-worker he called to bring a knife, he cut her seat belt and carried her to shore.

That moment, he recalled last week, was something that said, 'You know what? If you can jump in, jump in.' And I had a chance to jump in with this again, with the video, and so I said, 'You know what? I'm going to jump in one more time.'"

It's one — amazing — thing to try to rescue a woman drowning right in front your eyes. But to have empathy for enslaved workers on the other side of the world, and to try to rescue a country from a candidate who had no such empathy, is even more amazing. Even if he buried the lede.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.