

MAKING *DIEGO'S DREAM*

by

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ABSTRACT

Diego's Dream is a short documentary film about a young man named Diego Catalan who was brought from Mexico to the United States when he was only eight years old. In the film, Diego recounts his vivid memory of the experience of crossing the border as a child, and reflects on current issues of immigration, prejudice, and opportunity.

Diego's story provides a chilling and, at times, tragic look into the dangerous conditions faced by Mexican immigrants. He sheds light on the difficult economic conditions that motivate many to leave their home countries and come to the United States in search of something better. He acknowledges the difficulties surrounding the issue of illegal immigration, and states his views about immigration, along with his family's needs, with courage and honesty; he expresses a hope for the future that cannot help but inspire.

Diego's Dream was directed and edited by Peter C. Davidson in conjunction with the programs Life Through the Lens and Humanities in Focus at the University of Utah. The film runs approximately twelve and a half minutes and is available to watch online.

This document, titled "Making *Diego's Dream*", has been written to accompany the film for its submission as a Senior Honors Thesis at the University of Utah.

NOTE: *Diego's Dream* can be viewed online at this link:

vimeo.com/petercdavidson/diegosdream

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INTRODUCTION

Diego's Dream tells the true story of a young man who crossed the border from Mexico to the United States when he was only eight years old.

I made this film to give a young Mexican immigrant a voice so he could share his story with the world. Many people, including powerful political figures, are quick to judge and condemn others based on their race or country of origin—I believe that this judgment comes primarily from a lack of understanding that we are all human beings with hopes, fears, and dreams. It is my hope that sharing *Diego's Dream* will begin to eliminate this lack of understanding, and help those who might be inclined to hold prejudices to instead feel sincere concern for people like Diego.

Discovering, capturing, and sharing this story through the medium of film has been one of the most transformative and powerful experiences of my entire life, and I am so grateful for the support that Diego and I have received in our efforts to lift and inspire others with this film.

THEORY

I was very glad that, as a Film and Media Arts student, I had the opportunity to create a film for my thesis project in lieu of an essay. I have long believed that video and sound are the most powerful tools for communicating ideas, and carry a convincing power that traditional print media can lack. Andrei Tarkovsky, a pioneering Soviet filmmaker, said the following about film editing:

Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of the features of his finished piece, removes everything that is not part of it—so the film-maker, from a 'lump of time' made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film. (Tarkovsky, 63-64)

This concept reflects very well my attitude towards film editing and the approach I took when editing *Diego's Dream*. After completing the initial interviews, I had hours of raw material to work with, and had control over how to take that “solid cluster of living facts” and sculpt it into a moving, powerful story that people could both learn from and enjoy.

I knew that I wanted to avoid making an overt political statement with my film, nor did I want to show support or opposition towards any particular political party or policy, as such partisan films often alienate viewers and are thus limited in their reach and influence. Rather, I wanted to foster understanding and compassion in all viewers, regardless of their priorities or political affiliation. I knew that I would have to make careful choices in the editing room to shape the documentary and allow the film to have the greatest impact on the greatest number of people.

CONTEXT

On June 16, 2015—just months before production began on *Diego's Dream*—Donald J. Trump announced his candidacy for President of the United States. One of his most-quoted statements from that speech was, “When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (*Time*).

A national survey of adults in the U.S. conducted a few months later found that nearly half (46%) of Americans supported building a fence along the entire Mexican border, and over a third (37%) favored changing the constitution to bar citizenship for U.S.-born children of parents who are not legal residents (*Pew Research Center*).

It was in this political context that I entered Jeff Metcalf's Life Through the Lens class during the Fall 2015 semester at The University of Utah.

The class consists of a partnership with Humanities in Focus, or HIF, “a two-semester documentary filmmaking course designed to help non-traditional adult learners acquire the skills to make documentary films” (*Humanities in Focus*). Other Honors students and I had the opportunity to work with these community members to create “documentary films focused on social justice” (*Humanities in Focus*). I was excited by the opportunity to use my skills in new ways and find new stories to tell.

A couple of weeks after class started, we had a meeting during which we brainstormed documentary film topics as a group. I mentioned that I spoke Spanish and that I would be interested in completing a film about issues relevant to Utah's Latino population.

Later that class period, a group of fellow students invited me to join them: Stephanie Barajas, Diego Catalan, Juan Cruz, Maria Pedroza, Dora Renteria, Cristina Estrada Cortes, and Maria Sanchez. Most were community members participating in the class through the University Neighborhood Partners program. All were either first- or second-generation Mexican immigrants, and had a variety of unique life experiences concerning discrimination, racism, and difficulties related to immigration. They asked me if I would like to make a documentary with them, and I gladly accepted.

We discussed various possible topics for a film, including bilingualism, discrimination in school, and cultural difficulties faced by Latinos in the United States. When Diego Catalan talked about his life story, however—having been brought from Mexico to the United States when he was only eight years old—we knew we had a story that would inspire others and raise awareness of a relevant issue in a powerful way.

After speaking with Jeff Metcalf, my thesis advisor and professor for Life Through the Lens, I assumed a directorial role in the student group and we began production on the film that would become *Diego's Dream*. Many of our group dropped out of the two-semester course before *Diego's Dream* was completed, but my classmates helped with conducting interviews, producing transcripts, creating art for the documentary, and publicizing the screening.

METHOD

Equipment

I chose a simple two-camera setup to film each interview—two Canon 70Ds with kit 18-135mm lenses—and a Sennheiser lavalier microphone to capture audio. I also used F&V LED panels for basic lighting. This setup allowed me to capture sharp, high-quality images and sound from multiple angles with a one-man crew.

Choosing a Subject

We interviewed three subjects for the documentary. All three were young men who were brought from Mexico to the United States when they were very young, and my original plan was to use segments from all three interviews in the final film.

First, my classmates and I interviewed Jesús Lizarraga, who was born in Baja California, Mexico, and came to the United States when he was about five years old. He speaks English as his primary language, received his DACA work permit in 2014 (which gave him a Social Security number and the ability to work legally), and at the time of our interview in late 2015 was studying mechanical engineering at Salt Lake Community College. Although Jesús didn't remember much about crossing the border, he shared some fascinating insights about growing up between two cultures and about the factors that have helped him achieve success as a former illegal immigrant.

We also interviewed Bobby (last name withheld), who was brought from Mexico as a baby. Despite living in the U.S. from a very early age, Bobby was unable to achieve legal work status because he was convicted of a DUI only months before President Obama announced changes to the DREAM act that would have allowed him to get a work permit. His interview was powerful, and he asked me to hide his face if we used the

footage of his interview in the film due to the risk it would pose to him if he were identified.

Finally, we interviewed Diego Catalan. Unlike the other candidates, Diego was brought to the U.S. when he was eight years old, which meant that he had a vivid memory of what it was like to cross the border, learn English as a second language, and grow up in the midst of fear and discrimination before finally getting a legal work permit.

After consulting with my professors, I elected to focus the documentary solely on Diego: he had the most complete and detail-rich story, and seemed to have provided the best content for adaptation into a documentary film.

Editing

After capturing all three interviews and deciding to focus the film on Diego's story, I began editing in earnest. I used Adobe Premiere Pro software to edit the video and Adobe Audition for audio.

Editing is a very subjective process and, in my opinion, the most important step in a documentary film. As the editor of *Diego's Dream*, I had full control over what to include and remove from Diego's interview, and in what order to put it. I made a concerted effort to keep the film true to Diego's experience and opinions, but in many cases, I took advantage of my editing tools to reorder words and sentences for clarity and narrative effect.

The final edit of the film follows an A-B-A-B-A-B structure, alternating between story and reflection:

- **Story (A) - 0:00-1:20**
 - Diego relates the events leading up to his family's departure.

- **Reflection (B) - 1:23-2:36**
 - Diego reflects on why his family chose to come to America.
- **Story (A) - 2:39-7:05**
 - Diego tells the story of crossing the border and reaching his dad safely in the United States.
- **Reflection (B) - 7:11-8:09**
 - Diego reflects on the concept of illegal immigration and the problem with telling immigrants to come “the right way.”
- **Story (A) - 8:09-9:12**
 - Diego talks about seeing a four-year-old girl with her dead mother in the desert while crossing the border.
- **Reflection (B) - 9:18-10:48**
 - Diego shares some of his life goals and dreams and what he hopes will come of sharing his story.

After assembling the sound and video of Diego's narrative, I began to gather supplementary material to make the documentary more powerful and engaging. I scanned over 70 pictures from Diego's family records, and incorporated many of them into the introductory sequence of the film. I gathered stock footage and photos from various sources to illustrate key points of Diego's story. Local artist and fellow HIF member Cristina Estrada Cortes volunteered her time to produce several drawings which served as a visual representation of important moments in the story, covered certain transitions between sections of the film, and accompanied the end credits.

Music is an important part of any film, and it was a high priority for me to procure an excellent soundtrack for *Diego's Dream*. Due to my limited budget, I could not afford to commission an original soundtrack for the piece, but I was able to find several fitting royalty-free tracks from composer Kevin MacLeod via his website, incompetech.com, and license them for free in exchange for attribution in the credits. I spent a long time searching for the right songs and crafting the tracks to fit my edited video, and vice versa. In the end, I was very happy with the result, and feel that I was able to use the music both to enhance the film emotionally and support the thematic transitions in the piece.

PUBLICATION AND RESPONSE

Diego's Dream premiered publicly on April 18th, 2016, in the Gould Auditorium at the University of Utah's Marriott Library. Over 150 people were in attendance. Diego, the subject of the film, was also present and received a standing ovation after the screening.

To date, *Diego's Dream* has been screened nine times in both private and public settings:

- Emeriti Professors Club Luncheon - 12 April 2016
- Humanities in Focus Premiere Screening - 18 April 2016
- FiRe Conference CEO Household Screening - 3 May 2016
- FiReFilms Marquee Film Shorts Series - 12 May 2016
- F&MAD Student Film Festival - 25 September 2016
- FiReFilms Members Sundance Opening Night Reception - 19 January 2017
- Undergraduate Research Symposium - 4 April 2017
- Utah Women of the UN Film Festival - 6 April 2017
- Humanities in Focus Documentary Showcase - 18 April 2017

The film has been viewed over 700 times online as well.

The response to the film has been overwhelmingly positive, and the requests for repeat screenings were a welcome surprise. Sharon Anderson Morris, director of FiReFilms, has been one of the driving forces behind sharing the film and one of Diego's biggest fans. At the screening on January 19th, 2017, she said the following when introducing the film: “*Diego's Dream* broke my heart . . . this film is a 15-minute film that is made better than some of the best directors I've ever known.” Commenting on the

current political climate, Morris also said, “I think that this is an extremely important time to share this film. Especially today, especially tomorrow. Share it with your friends. Talk about this, because this is where we are now.” It is perhaps relevant to note that Donald J. Trump, who had spoken so disparagingly of Mexican immigrants 18 months earlier, was to be sworn in as President of the United States the very next day.

CONCLUSION

I am humbled and grateful for the positive response that *Diego's Dream* has received so far and hope that it continues to be shared and viewed by many. I've had the opportunity to spend lots of time with Diego in the year or so since the film premiered, and I've gained an even deeper appreciation for his generosity and goodwill. He has inspired me, and I know that his story will continue to inspire others.

As the world becomes increasingly more divided, and as violence and prejudice mount, it is my hope that there will always be people like Diego and his supporters who will reach out to one another and seek to understand rather than to judge.

The influence of my film has been relatively limited thus far, but it has renewed my faith in the power of sound and images to influence people for good. If even one person decides to be more loving, patient, or understanding as a result of *Diego's Dream*, I will consider my work to be a success.

I am indescribably grateful for the opportunity I had to create this film, to share it with others, and now, to submit it as a Senior Honors Thesis. To all those who will read this: thank you for taking the time to do so. Keep dreaming!

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