Frente al mar (Oceanfront): A Short Film

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Frente al mar (Oceanfront)

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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May 2012

Honors Capstone Project in Film

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Abstract

The inspiration for Frente al Mar (Oceanfront) came in 2009 during the winter break vacation on my first year of college. I was visiting at home in Puerto Rico, when the story broke in the news about a group of families being evicted from their houses after living there for many years.

According to the reports, the government identified these families as squatters and Dominican undocumented immigrants. As I was watching the news, TV reporter Efrén Arroyo was giving a summary of the entire situation, as well as placing it in the context of similar cases in the past.

February 6, 1980, was the date when the police left six motherless children, whose ages ranged from 2-13 years old, and a widower, who received several shots in his leg from the discharge that killed Adolfina Villanueva. They were all removed from the house, and immediately after, the police brought in a bulldozer and demolished the building. They were determined to enforce the “law,” no matter to what extent.

After I watched Efrén Arroyo’s newscast, I was completely outraged by the facts. It was mind-blowing to realize the extent to which someone (the police, representing government authority) would impose himself or herself to enforce the law, no matter how unfair it was.

Few knew and fewer cared about Adolfina’s real story, the reason why she came out with the machete. I grew frustrated knowing that this could continue to happen, not to the same extent, but that authorities could get away with destroying families. I felt the urge to tell Adolfina’s story in Frente al mar (Oceanfront), a short film that explores the injustice towards a poor family and shows how a mother is capable of sacrificing her life to defend her house, but most important her family. This maternal value itself transcends different cultures and eras.
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**Frente al Mar (Oceanfront): Reflective Essay**

For me, the most important part of the filmmaking process consists in looking for story ideas that are gripping and worth telling. This is a continuous process of observing and reading many different things, such as newspapers, documentaries, and people on the street. Almost every idea has the potential to become a short or feature film; however I’m constantly looking for ideas that are relevant to me on a personal and/or cultural level. I want my work to be successful on several levels. The potential that an idea holds to start a discourse on the subject matter is a factor that comes to play when I am deciding upon it.

*Ecstasy* is a word I use to describe how a great idea feels to me. When I think of it, a river of images, sounds, and music flows effortlessly in my mind. I’m not quite sure how all this works, but there is something magical about this initial idea.

As I look back at my previous projects as a filmmaker, I seem to be drawn to psychological and political issues. Most of my work has been strongly influenced by real events. My Capstone Project *Frente al Mar (Oceanfront)*, is no exception to the themes that recur in my work.

The inspiration for *Frente al Mar (Oceanfront)* came in 2009 during the winter break vacation on my first year of college. I was visiting at home in Puerto Rico, when the story broke in the news about a group of families being evicted from their houses after living there for many years.

According to the reports, the government identified these families as squatters and Dominican undocumented immigrants. I found it shocking that the
government would be leaving several families homeless, regardless of the reasons. As I was watching the news, TV reporter Efrén Arroyo was giving a summary of the entire situation, as well as placing it in the context of similar cases in the past.

On a beautiful morning, the police marched to the Loíza Aldea shoreline with shotguns and a bulldozer. Surrounding a small wooden house, they started throwing tear gas. Three children were asleep. Their mother came into their bedroom and grabbed them, to take them to a safer area. Her husband came out of the house to convince the police to give the family more time, until the judge could make a final decision. The police sergeant informed them that the judge’s final decision favored eviction. Outraged at this inhumane situation, the mother came out of the house, with machete in hand, followed by three of her six children. The police sergeant in charge of the eviction shot her dead in front of her husband.

February 6, 1980, was the date when the police left six motherless children, whose ages ranged from 2-13 years old, and a widower, who received several shots in his leg from the discharge that killed Adolfina Villanueva. They were all removed from the house, and immediately after, the police brought in a bulldozer and demolished the building. They were determined to enforce the “law,” no matter to what extent.

After I watched Efrén Arroyo’s newscast, I was completely outraged by the facts. It was mind-blowing to realize the extent to which someone (the police, representing government authority) would impose himself or herself to enforce the law, no matter how unfair it was.
I began to research the case in order to understand the situation better, looking for both sides of the story, I realized that this event was merely covered by the news. When I asked other people about their feelings regarding this incident, a few people knew, but most, if not all, of my generation and younger had no idea of this terrible act that scarred the community of Loíza Aldea. Again, I was angry, not just about the fact that it happened, but also the fact that it was barely given any attention, and now (2009) many people were in favor of removing those families from their houses. As I read the bits of news I could find about Adolfina Villanueva, the same information kept on appearing. All the articles were focused on the actual event, placing too much emphasis on the fact that she came out waving a machete at the police, and was shot. The image of a mother of six young children coming out with a machete was so strong that I kept on thinking about it for many days. Why would she come out with a machete? The answer was obvious to protect her house and family. But many people, like the police sergeant, took it as an attack.

Considering the magnitude of the story, and the fact that not much information was provided by the news, more in-depth research was essential for the realization of this short film. Different approaches were made to better comprehend the entire situation regarding the micro system of a poor family and the dominant macro system of Puerto Rican socio-economic structures in the late 1970s and in 1980s.

In the first half of the 20th century, it was usual for farm landowners to give a small part of their land to their foreman, in exchange for watching over the property. This transfer of land ownership was never done on paper, but in those
times someone’s word was as valid as a written signature. This happened between Don Victoriano (Adolfina’s father), and the owner of the land, Don Vermundo Quiñones. Don Victoriano raised his entire family on this land on the oceanfront of Loíza Aldea. When Adolfina’s sister married, Don Victoriano gave her part of his land to build a house for her new family. He did the same when Adolfina married Agustín Carrasquillo. In a small wooden house just a few steps from the ocean Adolfina and Agustín were raising six children. Slowly but surely the house grew throughout the years, as the family was getting bigger.

By the 1950s, Puerto Rico became a well known tourist destination. Many developments were rapidly built. During that time the government was blind toward certain people with power, allowing them to take over the parts of the costal zone. Illegally they would fence and forbade the access to a public area. After many years, Veremundo Quiñones, Jr., inherited his father’s land, which at the time was highly valued. As he surveyed his inheritance, he noticed the presence of Adolfina’s family and called them “squatters”; he tried by all means to remove this family from his land in order to sell it.

I started by contacting community leaders, such as Tati Fridman to get a better sense of the neighborhood, to see if I could interview people who knew Adolfina, and I hoped to interview her widower.

After meeting with two community leaders, I had a chance to interview Adolfina’s former neighbors Doña Josefa and Don Goyito. According to them, Adolfina was a very protective mother who focused entirely on raising her children in her humble wood-frame house. She didn’t share much with her neighbors and didn’t like that her children went out to play with other kids.
Adolfina had strong values and was rigorous about her children’s education. After these conversations, I still felt that in order to focus the film on Adolfina, I needed to understand her better on a more intimate level.

The widower, Don Agustín Villanueva, was my best source of information. I had the chance to interview him, which is how I really came to know Adolfina better. He was a little reluctant at first before letting me interview him, as he had negative experiences with reporters and people who offered to tell their story of the events, but never did anything. After explaining to him my desire to make a short film based on this terrible event, he doubted my word and then said that it would be nice if one day someone would tell their side of the story. It was difficult for him to remember and talk about that difficult part of his past, but we talked for approximately an hour in his house in the neighborhood Vieques (not the island-municipality) in Loíza Aldea where he now lives with his new wife. Contrary to my idea of a fisherman, his way of speaking and handshake were too gentle. I noticed that he was still limped on his left leg, where he had been shot four times. As I took notes, I learned more about their relationship. Don Agustín seemed to be a more passive person compared to Adolfina, who basically managed the entire house. His interview confirmed everything that the neighbors had told me, but we couldn’t go into too much detail about the day of her death. When we started talking about it, Don Agustín’s eyes began to fill with tears, and he couldn’t continue the interview. He talked about how the loss of Adolfina had made a huge impact on the mental stability of the children; how they had to be treated by a psychologist to deal with the trauma. He claimed that the youngest one went crazy without the presence of his mother. For many years after
Adolfina’s death, her mother (the children’s grandmother) claimed custody of the children, but he fought to keep them by his side. It wasn’t an easy task for him, but he managed to raise his children and continues fishing up to this date.

**Adolfina’s Legacy**

Few knew and fewer cared about Adolfina’s real story, the reason why she came out with the machete. I grew frustrated knowing that this could continue to happen, not to the same extent, but that authorities could get away with destroying families. I felt the urge to tell Adolfina’s story in *Frente al mar* (*Oceanfront*), a short film that explores the injustice towards a poor family and shows how a mother is capable of sacrificing her life to defend her house, but most important her family. This maternal value itself transcends different cultures and eras.

However, the community sees Adolfina as their hero. In 1982, a community of squatters in Rio Grande, called “*Villa sin miedo*” (or “Fearless Village”) named their main street *Adolfina Villanueva*. They, too, were asked to leave the land they had invaded, but they refused. Their case ended up in the Supreme Court, and they fought tooth and nail inspired by Adolfina’s bravery. Every February 6, community leader, Tati Fridman would have a gathering in front of a mural in memory of Adolfina Villanueva. As they commemorated the death of Adolfina, they would shout: “For the communities, long live Adolfina! For the workers, long live Adolfina! For the environment, long live Adolfina!,” thereby praising and manipulating the memory of a person who acted boldly and confronted the authorities for her ideals and personal cause. “Those who knew her say that she was not a frail creature of sweet manner, or a self-sacrificing mother, or an afflicted woman… In the press she was described as they describe women
of her kind: thin and tough, with an angry look: dark like a marsh animal, with a clamped jaw. That’s how they describe women like Adolfina, those women who resist being the obedient servants,” says Mayra Santos-Febres in her short essay on Adolfina Villanueva. As a society, we have always been inclined to mystify somewhat the struggles and the causes of those whom we call heroes, out of admiration for their acts of courage.

**Writing the Screenplay**

I started writing the screenplay for *Frente al mar* in the last weeks of May 2011. At that point, I knew that I wanted to focus on the mysterious figure, who happens to be the protagonist, Adolfina. I considered the day of the event as my climax, so I knew that my focus would be on Adolfina and her way of managing and coping with the stressful situation. I needed to learn more about her. My first draft consisted of everything that I’d read in newspaper and articles, but I couldn’t see much of her character; she was still a sort of enigma. I was putting together the story and making a new draft every time I would meet with someone different, whether it was a neighbor or her widower. Every time, the story would morph and grow by itself. I continued to do research during the entire summer. Every person that I met was essential for the development of the story, as my contacts gave me more insight into Adolfina Villanueva, helping me understand her on a deeper level. I gathered all the information on the eviction case and Adolfina’s family relationships. I went through a selection process to sketch out an outline that would help me tell the story. The biggest challenge was filling the gaps in the stories people told me, because I wanted to maintain the narrative as close to reality as possible. It was inevitable I would take some creative license and work
out a script that would tell my message more clearly and, at the same time, keep it interesting for my audience. *Frente al mar (Oceanfront)* is by no means a documentary nor an exact reproduction of what happened, but I believe that it captures the essence of Adolfina Villanueva and provides insight on the events that lead her to an early death.

In late May 2011, I was already writing the outlines for what would later become the film. I soon realized that Adolfina’s case was very extensive. It had dragged on for several years without any conclusion until February 6th, 1980. After writing down all the different events through the many years before her death, I chose the ones that would communicate the story better. Then I tried to incorporate the children while keeping the story simple. Also, it was important to keep the costs to a minimum, so I used only two locations the house and the beach, which made the film more feasible.

I used a three-act structure to help me organize in a logical and dramatic way the events that would lead to Adolfina’s death. Originally, I wanted to keep the film as close as possible to her real story, but I learned that in many cases filmmakers use their creative license to enable them to tell a story that would communicate to the audience. The idea was to tell a story that was inspired by the actual events and that would get the audience closer to the character whom we knew only from the news perspective. I wanted to add depth, purpose and motivation to Adolfina, in contrast to the media, which disseminated story provided by the police, which portrays her as a violent person and a severe threat. On the other hand, the community in her town of Loíza Aldea sees her as a martyr; a person who stood up and fought for her land and a hero in a community
that has always been neglected by the government. None of these portray an accurate un-biased view of Adolfina. I’m not saying that this film is an accurate representation of her, but it sets out to humanize a figure that has become iconic.

The entire writing process was a balancing act – juggling to tell the story in less than twenty minutes, without a sense of it being rushed or without glossing over the characters and the situation, which was important for the audience to understand and contemplate. The understanding of the family dynamics, the importance of the ocean and the place where the story took place before the eviction order became official, are essential to the comprehension of the story. The setup of their lives helps the audience understand how the problem affects each of the characters and gives us an idea of what the characters’ objectives would be when faced with the problem.

A man pulling a boat into the seashore is the first image seen by the audience. This image has several functions. First, it introduces two important characters, the man and the ocean, which is the eternal witness and kind companion of our protagonist, Adolfina. It is clear that this indistinguishable man is not our protagonist, as we are not able to clearly see his face or identify with him. From this image, we understand only the man’s situation as a fisherman. As he goes inside a wooden house, we still haven’t seen the man’s face or have any idea of who he is, other than a fisherman. The first person that we see in a close-up is Adolfina. Framing her so tightly lets the audience understand the importance of this character. The scene shows Adolfina in a very motherly manner, brushing her daughter’s hair as her husband comes in and gives her a kiss. From this moment on, the relationship between the fisherman and the protagonists is clear.
After understanding they are husband and wife, we cut to a wider shot of the same scene, which reveals their other five children. As Adolfina sends them off to school, the audience has already all the information necessary to follow the narrative. The narrative continues to show other aspects of their lives and how they tried to resolve their problem. Before the climax, which is when Adolfina gets shot, the narrative builds very slowly.

The ending of the film was the most interesting part to figure in the entire process. After shooting and editing several versions of it, I came back to the actual news footage that first inspired me to make this film. I wanted to focus on Adolfina for the entire film, but I needed to place her and the story in context. The best way to do this was to incorporate an edited version of the actual newscast that I saw in 2009. After experimenting with that footage, I finally achieved the closure that I wanted. The last step in production was asking the television station for permission to use it, and to see if they could provide me higher quality footage since all I had access to were clips of the news coverage found on YouTube.

**Inside the Characters**

I wanted to explore the story on an intimate and humane level, focusing on Adolfina’s internal struggle. She could do little as a housewife in a very poor household in 1980 and as the mother of six children, but that is precisely what makes her such an essential character, the pillar of the family structure. She would maintain order in the house and focus on solving the problem that affected everyone in the family, while trying to keep the children unaware of the entire situation. She managed to keep her house in order as her life was falling apart. Adolfina Villanueva proved to be a strong woman, one who was not intimidated
by a corrupt police system and unscrupulous people who would do anything to benefit their pockets. To explore the issues surrounding her struggle, it was essential to center the story a few days before her fateful death.

This story is much larger than what could be shown in less than twenty minutes. There were many reasons why I decided to keep the story to the minimum. First I wanted to explore Adolfina’s character and to show her more humane side. She was neither the monster that the police said, nor the hero that the neighborhood claims. Adolfina was a human being who lived under tough circumstances and who acted to defend her house and family.

In order to give more depth to Adolfina’s character, it was important to spend more time with her; in other words, we had to see the story through her own eyes and experiences. From these daily tasks and activities, we discovered many things about her. We realized her deep devotion for Christianity; specifically devoted to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Fishermen in Spain and Latin America have named Our Lady of Mount Carmel as their loyal protector, also known as the “Star of the Sea” or “Stella Maris.” In Puerto Rico, Catholics celebrate her feast day on February 2. Every year in the coastal towns of Loíza and Aguadilla, the entire community comes together to celebrate and give thanks to their patron, as both towns rely on fishing. In this film, it was necessary to highlight the importance of the ocean as their mean of survival, especially during harsh times.

Another aspect that was important for me to highlight was the fact that Adolfina as a protective mother didn’t want her children to know of the difficult and unstable situation they were in. It was extremely important for her to keep the
children out of everything and unaware of what was happening. Because of their vulnerability, she tried hard to keep everything normal, while Agustín would be sent out on errands to try to solve the problem.

The relationship between Adolfina and Agustín was unique. In many ways, they were the opposite of each other. Agustín described himself as a passive person. He prefers to avoid problems by talking his way out of every single thing. He is also more willing to conform to his situation than Adolfina. Adolfina, on the other hand, was the dominant figure. According to my research she had a strong personality. Adolfina would fight for her beliefs, ideals and the people that she loved. In their relationship it is quite evident who runs the house. There is a clear duality in this relationship; even though Agustín was the man of the house and seems to be standing up for his family, most of the time Adolfina asked him to do those things. Like the common saying, “The husband should always have the last two words –yes dear.” That was Agustín’s situation.

Although I wanted to keep the focus on Adolfina as much as possible, I was also making a film about a family that was on the verge of being destroyed, so I focused on the tensions that arouse from their difficult circumstances and explored the daily interactions that built up to her last day.

One of the most enraging facts was that six children were left orphaned from an unjust eviction. For that reason, I wanted to have the children present during most of the time to remind the audience that I wasn’t just talking about Adolfina and her husband, but also about the children. The challenge was how to incorporate them without their being just background, but avoid outshining the real focus of the film, which is the struggle and coping of their mother. Although
they acted as a group, some of their characters had a more developed personality, which blossomed in several scenes.

The structure of the film was designed to give a few of the children a time to interact with Adolfiná on a one-to-one level, allowing the audience a chance to see their perspective. I believe that the most successful scene in which I tried to do what I am describing is when Marilyn licks her plate and goes to her mother, saying that she is hungry. Through the interactions among Adolfiná, Agustín, and Marilyn, the audience is given more insight into their situation, which is not optimal. They are clearly struggling. Although the children seemed content and a bit oblivious at times, they are able to feel the struggle that their parents are going through. “Eat this and go to sleep,” was Adolfiná’s answer, as if sleep would make Marilyn less hungry. Sleep is your friend when times are harsh.

The duality can be seen throughout the film as Agustín goes to the Capitol to meet with the lawyer and to try to solve their problems, but his wife always sends him, while she continues to do her housewife chores. She opts to wait for him to report back about his attempts to talk sense into the authorities in the city, while at home, and she is the one to defend the house against the teen vandals or anyone lurking around the house.

One of the most essential scenes for the understanding of this relationship is before the final day. In this scene, Adolfiná puts all her children to sleep when Agustín comes back with terrible news. Adolfiná, knowing where she sent Agustín, interprets his silence to mean that the lawyer left the case. For Agustín, with no defense on their behalf, the fight is already over. He prefers to leave immediately and avoid any problems with the authorities. Adolfiná, on the other
hand, has strong feelings for her land, the place where she grew up, and she isn’t willing to give up. She will continue fighting no matter what, in order to keep her children safe with a roof above their heads. Adolfina, in her rage, makes Agustín realize that the land belongs to her and that the eviction is unjust. Agustín understands her and agrees to stay until the judge in charge of their case makes the final decision.

**Organizing the Production Team**

During the summer of 2009, I interned for the production company Paradiso Films, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. They liked my work and offered me their help on the production of my senior thesis. I contacted Paradiso Films (now Nostrom Moving Images Group) in April 2011. It was probably around 8 p.m. when I called from Prague, where I was studying abroad, with hope that their offer was still standing. Effectively, I just had to get back to the island and get to work. But it wasn’t as easy as I first thought. What that phone conversation meant was that I had the support from a team of producers and a director of photography. How involved they would be in the production I wouldn’t know until I talked with them personally, but already had the commitment from a team of professionals.

I went to Nostrom with my first draft to meet my team. They offered to help me on the technical side, which meant that they would cover the film equipment. The owner of the company who is a director of photography for TV commercials wanted to work on my project. They would also help me find crew members who would only charge a fraction of their regular fee. I just needed to find the locations and my actors.
Scouting Locations

Looking for a wooden house on a Puerto Rican coast wasn’t an easy task in the 21st century. I scouted the island for a whole month looking for this house. It had to look right, with wooden doors and old aluminum windows. I spent approximately three weeks looking in Loíza Aldea, but none of the houses worked. I drove through the entire north coast of the island for days without success; I would enter and ask about the availability of different houses. Almost by chance, one day, I stopped in an establishment to ask about an adjacent house and was informed there was a house in the neighborhood of Magüayó in the town of Dorado that would be an ideal location for the short film. I went to that neighborhood right away and saw my perfect house. Fortunately, no one lived there, and I was able to rent the location for the weeks that took us to prepare and shoot everything.

Scouting for Talent

As I was looking for the ideal location, I started thinking of the talent for my film. I had a few ideas of the actors that I would like to work with. Maybe it was faith or pure coincidence, but I never thought the process of casting the main roles would be unconventional. I always make the effort to go to film events, art exhibits, theater and other cultural events to enrich my knowledge. During the last week of June 2011, Sundance was presenting Film Forward, an international cultural exchange program, in Puerto Rico. I went with my mother to the opening night of the event and saw Idenisse Salamán, a well-known actress from Puerto Rico. There she was, the ideal actress for the main role of Adolfina. As I was talking with my mother about her, wondering how could I get her in my film. As
we mingled we turned to the person next to us to ask the actress name and that person happened to be Ms. Salamán’s cousin. So I pitched my idea to Ms. Salamán’s cousin and she loved it. She immediately texted the actress explaining who I was and what I wanted to do. That very night we started working together on the project. Don Teófilo Torres, who plays Agustín in my film, is also one of the best actors from Puerto Rico. He was the master of ceremonies at the opening night of Film Forward Puerto Rico. Although I didn’t have the chance to meet him at the event, I called his acting school and pitched my idea in order to get access to his email. I had to email him my script and a few days later he answered with a “yes”.

Framing the Scenes

The framing of the images helps create a visual arc that comes from the plot line. It is through the framing of the shot that the subtle changes in the family dynamics are shown. Throughout the story the dynamics of the characters changes, with the different framings I’m able to hint to the shift happening on screen adding more depth to the narrative. These elements are layers that act independently, but also help understand the bigger picture. Some of these elements are framing, which was previously discussed, as well as color, sound, and music. When it comes to framing, everything from whether it be a balanced or imbalanced composition, the scale, and the selection of the focus, determines the way the audience reads the film.

In the 1980s, it was expected for men to be the main support of the family. However, from my research, I came to understand the duality that existed in this household. Adolfina was a housewife; she who took care of cleaning the house,
cooking and caring for the children, but she was passionate about defending what was hers, and she had a strong personality. From the information I gathered, I concluded that she was a strong, hard-working woman, who contained her emotions and acted decisively and on the spot. Agustín was the total opposite. He recalls being the one who would calm her down. Agustín preferred to talk rather than fight to avoid problems.

I wanted to show Adolfin,a gradually becoming the absolute pillar of the family. I show this change in different ways, both through framing and blocking. There are two essential scenes for the understanding of their relationship. The first is when she hands him the eviction letter, and we see his reaction from a medium-two-shot. As we see her reaction in a close-up, she is framed behind Agustín. Although his shoulder is out of focus he blocks her, which diminishes her power in the scene. As he shares with her his concern about the problem, Adolfin,a asks him in a soft voice to go to the Capitol and check what is happening.

On the next day, Agustín and Adolfin,a are having a conversation in the backyard, as she is peeling off the scales of the fish he caught. In this frame, Agustín’s scale is significantly larger than Adolfin,a’s, and she is out of focus and in the background. The framing symbolizes that up until this point there hasn’t been a change in their relationship. By the second half of this scene, Adolfin,a comes into focus, but Agustín remains the forefront figure for the family until the following scene that the police officer try to go into the house and is confronted by Adolfin,a, who is inside taking care of her children. This situation is one of the turning points of the story. Now the threat of the eviction is real, and the need to do something increases. In this scene, there is a clear change in their dynamics
and in the way each one of them copes with the situation. The framing and blocking of the characters in this scene amplify the change in their dynamics. In a very tight shot, we see the intense confrontation between Adelfina and the policeman, Sergeant Estrella. Agustín, who is not framed during the entire confrontation, is telling her to calm down, as he has been established as more passive of the two. The scene ends with the policeman’s leaving, but the camera stays on Adelfina the entire time, as she walks down the porch until Agustín tries to soothe her and stops her.

Adelfina is constantly thinking of ways to solve their problem. She knows that she would need a lawyer, money and determination to continue fighting. Each scene gives the audience a better understanding of her motivation making it easier to see why she would come out with a machete when finally confronted and threatened by the police. From this point on, whenever Adelfina is closely framed, there is nothing in the foreground blocking our view of her or diminishing her power. In her state of infuriation she has gained power and will to protect her house.

**Symbolisms**

The house represents the mother’s womb. In this house, Adelfina protects, at all costs, the physical, mental and emotional safety of her children. The inside of the house is painted in several pink and salmon tonalities complemented by deep reds and yellow from the other elements. The warm tones that dominate in the house work in direct opposition to the blue uniforms of the police officers, who are violating Adelfina’s sacred and protected place.
As the tension increases, with Quiñones lurking, the attack of the teen vandals and the visits of the policemen, Adolfina’s costume has changed from one that is a passive sky blue to one that is an aggressive red. This reflects an internal change in her and the realization that she has to fight for what is hers.

The machete is an object with strong, political connotation in Puerto Rican society. It is a proud symbol of the nationalist movement that has fought for Puerto Rico’s independence for more than almost century. The machete is associated with laborers of the land, those who suffered the biggest loss and were widely persecuted by authorities in the interest of U.S. industrial developments that transformed the way of life of the Island from the late 19th century to this day. For that reason I wanted to present the machete as more than just a tool or a threatening weapon, as it was referred to in the local news. It was important to state that for Adolfina, the machete was a working tool. When it is made clear that she constantly used her machete on a daily basis, the audience is able to understand why she comes out with it when she feels threatened. This is her only available tool for the survival and protection of her family.

**Personal Reflections**

I’ll never forget the day when I first visited the neighborhood where Adolfina lived. I was with my parents in a slightly old, black 4-runner as we ventured into the narrow streets full of holes. I remember how the children playing in the street looked at us, as they had to stop playing for us to pass through. Their parents, casually talking with their neighbors in front of their houses, looked at us as well, wondering what we were doing in their neighborhood. I must admit we felt a bit unsure about my decision to go see the
place where the house stood. Sadly, the town of Loíza Aldea has a reputation as a violent place with a high incidence of crime on a regular basis. As we drove closer to the seashore, however, I started seeing luxurious apartments covering the once beautiful untouched landscape of the time when Adolfina lived. The road was better kept and widened at this point. Just as we reached the end of the road, almost on the shore where apartments ended, a concrete fence bordered the patch of sand where Adolfina’s house once stood strong. There was nothing special, not a single trace of what happened, nor a memorial to remind the neighborhood of their loss just a bare patch of sand the only feature that hasn’t change was the ocean the eternal witness of everything that happened.

**Future of this Project**

*Frente al mar (Oceanfront)* is a film that will have a life after its completion. My goal is to submit it to various film festivals worldwide, as well as in Puerto Rico. I will be looking for festivals with a focus on social issues and an appreciation for cultural exchange. I will also be screening it in the community of Dorado, where I shot the film. There will also be a website for the film, for major visibility, with information on the process behind the scenes and links to further information.

For me, this film is much more than what I originally envisioned. I hope that it will be a tool to raise awareness on this issue, to help people comprehend and be more compassionate towards others who don’t have the means to fight for themselves against powerful interests. Finishing this short film is just the beginning of my work as a filmmaker. Now begins the process of sharing this story with others, which is the reason why one makes the film on the first place.
As I share the story, I will be also sharing my experiences and what I learned through the intense process of filmmaking. There are numerous topics of great interest to me that I would love to explore in my next films. This entire process has definitely been a learning experience, and gave me the confidence and courage to continue expressing myself through the cinematographic medium.
DVD Menu

Production still
Summary of Capstone Project

For me, the most important part of the filmmaking process consists in looking for story ideas that are gripping and worth telling. This is a continuous process of observing and reading many different things, such as newspapers, documentaries, and people on the street. Almost every idea has the potential to become a short or feature film; however I’m constantly looking for ideas that are relevant to me on a personal and/or cultural level. I want my work to be successful on several levels. The potential that an idea holds to start a discourse on the subject matter is a factor that comes to play when I am deciding upon it.

The inspiration for Frente al Mar (Oceanfront) came in 2009 during the winter break vacation on my first year of college. I was visiting at home in Puerto Rico, when the story broke in the news about a group of families being evicted from their houses after living there for many years.

According to the reports, the government identified these families as squatters and Dominican undocumented immigrants. I found it shocking that the government would be leaving several families homeless, regardless of the reasons. As I was watching the news, TV reporter Efrén Arroyo was giving a summary of the entire situation, as well as placing it in the context of similar cases in the past.

On a beautiful morning, the police marched to the Loíza Aldea shoreline with shotguns and a bulldozer. Surrounding a small wooden house, they started throwing tear gas. Three children were asleep. Their mother came into their bedroom and grabbed them, to take them to a safer area. Her husband came out of
the house to convince the police to give the family more time, until the judge could make a final decision. The police sergeant informed them that the judge’s final decision favored eviction. Outraged at this inhumane situation, the mother came out of the house, with machete in hand, followed by three of her six children. The police sergeant in charge of the eviction shot her dead in front of her husband.

February 6, 1980, was the date when the police left six motherless children, whose ages ranged from 2-13 years old, and a widower, who received several shots in his leg from the discharge that killed Adolfina Villanueva. They were all removed from the house, and immediately after, the police brought in a bulldozer and demolished the building. They were determined to enforce the “law,” no matter to what extent.

After I watched Efrén Arroyo’s newscast, I was completely outraged by the facts. It was mind-blowing to realize the extent to which someone (the police, representing government authority) would impose himself or herself to enforce the law, no matter how unfair it was.

Considering the magnitude of the story, and the fact that not much information was provided by the news, more in-depth research was essential for the realization of this short film. Different approaches were made to better comprehend the entire situation regarding the micro system of a poor family and the dominant macro system of Puerto Rican socio-economic structures in the late 1970s and in 1980s.

In the first half of the 20th century, it was usual for farm landowners to give a small part of their land to their foreman, in exchange for watching over the
property. This transfer of land ownership was never done on paper, but in those
times someone’s word was as valid as a written signature. This happened between
Don Victoriano (Adolfina’s father), and the owner of the land, Don Vermundo
Quiñones. Don Victoriano raised his entire family on this land on the oceanfront
of Loíza Aldea. When Adolfina married, Don Victoriano gave her part of his land
to build a house for her new family.

By the 1950s, Puerto Rico became a well known tourist destination. Many
developments were rapidly built. During that time the government was blind
toward certain people with power, allowing them to take over the parts of the
costal zone. Illegally they would fence and forbade the access to a public area.
After many years, Veremundo Quiñones, Jr., inherited his father’s land, which at
the time was highly valued. As he surveyed his inheritance, he noticed the
presence of Adolfina’s family and called them “squatters”; he tried by all means
to remove this family from his land in order to sell it.

Few knew and fewer cared about Adolfina’s real story, the reason why she
came out with the machete. I grew frustrated knowing that this could continue to
happen, not to the same extent, but that authorities could get away with destroying
families. I felt the urge to tell Adolfina’s story in Frente al mar (Oceanfront), a
short film that explores the injustice towards a poor family and shows how a
mother is capable of sacrificing her life to defend her house, but most important
her family. This maternal value itself transcends different cultures and eras.

I wanted to explore this issue on an intimate and humane level, focusing
on Adolfina’s internal struggle. She could do little as a housewife in a very poor
household in 1980 and as the mother of six children, but that is precisely what
makes her such an essential character, the pillar of the family structure. She would maintain order in the house and focus on solving the problem that affected everyone in the family, while trying to keep the children unaware of the entire situation. She managed to keep her house in order as her life was falling apart. Adolfina Villanueva proved to be a strong woman, one who was not intimidated by a corrupt police system and unscrupulous people who would do anything to benefit their pockets. To explore the issues surrounding her struggle, it was essential to center the story a few days before her fateful death.

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