



72m

seventy2minutes.com

October 2014

Issue 15

the changing face of
beautiful



WEAVING

THE

PAST :



JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

In our fast, chaotic world, it is difficult to imagine the lives of those who came before us, even two generations ago and yet, more than ever, each of us still has a yearning to connect with our past, to better understand those who came before us and who made us who we are.

That is the journey undertaken by filmmaker Walter Dominguez in the extraordinary documentary “Weaving the Past: Journey of Discovery.”

As a young man, Dominguez was inspired by his grandfather, Emilio, known as “Tata,” who was one of the most prominent and beloved Mexican Methodist ministers in idyllic Santa Paula in rural Southern California. A community leader who was known for his generous heart and kind spirit, Tata died in 1973. Three decades later, with the generation that knew Tata best quickly dying away, Dominguez picked up his camera to uncover the long-hidden secrets of Tata’s earliest years. With his wife, producer Shelley Morrison (an actress

known for her role as Rosario on the long-running sitcom “Will and Grace”), Dominguez took eleven years to trace the scant clues of Tata’s past, through the border town of El Paso, to the rural mountains of turn-of-the-century Mexico. It turns out that Tata was part of the Mexican revolutionary movement, fighting alongside some of Mexico’s most courageous citizen warriors in an effort to oust the hated dictator Porfirio Díaz. With each new revelation comes a new mystery – and with each mystery, the incredible achievements of Tata’s later years become all the more remarkable.

72M Magazine invited Dominguez to shed some light on his documentary, the work behind it and the lessons learned through creating it.

Above: The young Emilio N. Hernandez.



One important focus of *Weaving the Past: Journey of Discovery* is to reveal the dignity, dedication and passion of a group of Mexican revolutionaries, led by a young journalist and ideologue Práxedes G. Guerrero, (*image left*) who fled to the U.S. in 1904 and made Los Angeles, California their base from which to actively seek

to topple the cruel and oppressive dictatorship of Mexico's president Porfirio Díaz. The people of the nation of Mexico, including hundreds of thousands of indigenous people and millions of mixed-blood peasants and even those of the struggling middle-class, had become ever more desperate under the corruption and domination of the elite super-rich families whose only concern were increasing their own status and money on the backs of the rest of the nation. Conditions had reached the breaking point. But someone needed to galvanize and organize the people into an uprising and revolution. The young revolutionaries under the leadership of Práxedes Guerrero thought they could be the ones to light the fuse to begin the revolt that would finally put to an end the decades-long rule of Porfirio Díaz.

Their ill-fated quest is examined through the lens of one of these young men, a younger comrade of Práxedes, Emilio N. Hernandez. We follow Emilio's journey and his transformation from a homeless Mexican peasant to a fighter for freedom and finally into a non-violent man of faith dedicating the rest of his life to helping Mexican immigrant families in the U.S.

Emilio Hernandez – whom I always called “Tata” – was my grandfather, and during a mid-life crisis thirteen years ago, he became the person I turned to for inspiration and renewal even though he had been dead for decades. I dedicated myself to learn all I could about him, especially his early life that had remained shrouded in so much mystery. Soon my investigation into his life became a film in which I documented the search for answers in the past – a past that was over hundred years before. And it led me to almost miraculously encounter

people, places and revelations I never anticipated would come forward. As I did this, I also encountered myself in ways that changed my life and gave me a sense of renewal and ultimately redemption.

American Latinos, the majority who are Mexican-Americans, have a hunger to see films that depict the reality of the history and culture of their family's place of origin. They, like me, yearn to see stories in which Latino people are not just hapless victims of difficult circumstances, or perpetrators of crime, but activists, heroes who change society for the better. They yearn to see stories in which the selflessness, nobility and dignity of Latino people is portrayed. Consequently, the response to this film from the Latino community has been incredible.

But there is also a ready audience among all Americans of all ethnic, religious and political backgrounds. They, too, have responded to this film. They, too, feel a spiritual hole due to the disconnection from their own ancestors' countries of origin, their own family histories and journeys here. Most Americans are descendants of immigrants, and the difficult or oppressive conditions that made them leave their homes and the struggles they faced to get here and establish themselves – these are epic human stories. Through my film people can reconnect with this part of themselves and vicariously through following the remarkable and inspiring story of Emilio, they make an inner connection with their own ancestors and past, and they find it is healing.

This film evolved organically. At first I was simply taking my DV camera along with me to interview the few remaining family elders while they were still alive and their memories had not faded. But as I recorded them on videotape, and listened to their remarkable stories and felt their powerful emotions that were conjured up as they opened themselves, I realized that there was something important here, something that I could and should share with others. It was clear that the way to share this was through the medium of a documentary.

However this was a slow process, making the film, there were pauses as I struggled to find the means to overcome a hundred years of time and somehow access the answers I sought. I am not a particularly religious man, not a churchgoer, though I respect religions when they cause people to be kind, caring, nurturing and compassionate with each other and the environment. Sadly, in my opinion, all too often religions have divided people and they have been used as justification and reason to dislike or hate others, bring harm to others, make wars on them, killing. Even when religions are just used to keep people in ignorance, they cause individual or mass suffering as a result of perpetuating backwards ideas. But I am a spiritual person, I believe in the power of prayer and love to make amazing things come about. When you ask me

how the film got made, I truthfully answer that the film happened because I asked for and tapped into a resource that every person has access to it if they realize they can ask for help. Is it from “God,” a kind of mythical deity in the sky, or simply a powerful and active creative force that exists in the universe we know? You can decide or not. But all I can say is that my grandfather exemplified a belief in some higher or larger power that he believed in with all his heart and soul and he called it God, and amazing things always happened when he asked his God for help and assistance for himself and others.

So whenever I was stuck and the quest was at a standstill and I was anxious and stymied, I turned to what I felt closest to - the memories and spirits of my grandfather, my other beloved relatives and whomever was “out there” that was benign and helpful. I asked for their assistance. And I got it. This kept me going through every obstacle and finally got all the answers and information, all the footage I needed to make a film.

That said, of course it takes money to make a film. A lot of money, much more than one

could ever imagine when one begins. I clearly could not seek investors to fund a film that was made so gradually and organically over time and which had no “ending” when I began the journey, which had no script or even an outline at the outset. Fortunately, I did have a spouse, Shelley Morrison, a veteran actress who had spent many, many years toiling in the often-arid vineyards of the Hollywood television and films, and she became my “angel” – the financial backer. Two years before I began my quest, she had become part of a socially groundbreaking, hilarious and immensely popular television comedy series titled, *Will & Grace*. She played the feisty and outspoken housekeeper “Rosario” and the character became a huge

fan hit. So that is how the film got funded, through that golden opportunity,

it must be said that only through the talents, skills and heart of a dedicated crew that worked with me over 13 years off and on, could I get the film photographed and edited, the music, sound, titles and all the endless technical and legal steps required to get a film on the screen. I also was blessed with a huge outpouring of cooperation and help from many, many photo archives, footage houses, universities/colleges and their libraries, private collections, government agencies, and the generosity of so many families and individuals in both the U.S. and Mexico. This was an enormous undertaking.

Still it was a slow process because some things just don’t happen overnight. Life takes its time to unfold.

Successes: Completing the film after working on it for thirteen years and feeling that I had told a satisfying and unusual story that took people on the journey along with me, that was success! Seeing audiences sitting there in darkened theaters to



watch it, paying their hard-earned money to see it, traveling across the vast traffic-choked roads and highways of Los Angeles to come see the film, that was awesome! That is success!

Hearing their reactions, comments and responses as they left the theater – most very strongly enjoying or loving the film and being moved by it, thinking about it, telling others about it; and some not so much - I realized that there is something truly sacred about making a film, it is for the people, and their time is valuable and irretrievable. We’re talking a bit over two hours of their lives spent watching your labor of love, and more time just getting there to the theater, and back home. People are giving

up a part of themselves to you and your work; it better be your best effort and have the most value for them that you can muster! We had a strong turnout for the film during its two-week run. And it seems that for a huge number of people I gave them (and my ancestors, all the interview subjects and my filmmaking team gave them) something worthy of giving up a chunk of their precious lives to see. That is success! Also kind of scary and sobering when you think about it.

Failures: Well this is always harder to think about and share about. I would say that one failure was to underestimate the amount of work that goes into making a documentary feature film, and in this case also a gigantic investment in years and expenditure of financial and emotional resources. But maybe that was all for the good: had I known in front what it would take, I surely would not have embarked on this project.

I leave it to the individual viewer to judge whether or not the film succeeded or failed. Each person who sees *Weaving the Past* has their own take away. I do not want to interfere with that by saying the film works for them or not, gives them something delicious or interesting and new, or not. The film works for me, I can say that definitely, and I have watched it a zillion times. So for me it is a success. I always see something else that interests me or moves me into tears every time.

I do not rely on so-called “film critics” or “film experts” to influence my feeling about whether or not my work succeeded or failed. I think audiences today instinctively know what they want to go see and they pay little attention to critics and experts’ opinions; they go because they have developed a level of awareness and sophistication that is amazing and they have an intuitive

sense of what they need that drives them to go see a film – or not.

The one big personal failure for me is that because I had to become truly devoted to the project, almost possessed by it for so many years, I could not be there for some of my friends and especially for some of my most important family members in the way I think they deserved and that I wanted. God bless her, my wife Shelley was understanding, supportive and generally very patient, but it often was hard on her because I was so involved in my work, always so under the gun and carrying around a cloud of pressure and anxiety until it got finished and up on the screen. But we made it through. Still, wouldn’t it be grand if one could wave a magic wand and magically write that novel, or build that business, or make that movie, or

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- Walter Dominguez





whatever you set out to accomplish. But it doesn't work that way. You have to struggle to achieve it, and there are always sacrifices and a price that is paid.

The reception for the film is nearly everything I could have dreamed of as I toiled on the film and after finishing. I made this film from my heart and my soul, and tried to make it as rich, informative and fulfilling as possible. I tried to make it a work of art as well as a documentary, which I think the best documentaries are – both art and document.

I tried to touch the intellects, the emotions and souls of viewers in crafting it. And from the responses of hundreds of people who have talked to me directly after seeing the film, and from those who sent me emails and posted their responses on Facebook and in letters to me, it is clear that what I and my team set out to do we accomplished. I am grateful and humbled by the response. Of course, there are some people who did not get what so many others got out of it; but that is par for the course. You cannot please everyone, as much as you would like to. Still so many people have been generous and helpful, the film triggering in them a desire to help me get the film out to wider circles of audiences. It has been wonderful.

Even while we were completing *Weaving the Past*, we started developing and videotaping interviews for our next documentary project, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles*. It is another ambitious undertaking

that I pray does not require another 13 years to complete! Actually, we are pretty far along with it and the people we have interviewed – historians and “real” people alike (no offense to our historians!) – have been uniformly compelling and so informative and eye opening. This project is a history of the city of Los Angeles from its indigenous origins, through the Spanish-Mexican era, and into the American era up to the post-WWII era. Los Angeles is a city that has always appeared to others (even to inhabitants) as having no history worthy of talking about, but the opposite is true. This incredibly diverse, creative and culturally innovative place has had a remarkable, amazing history and people need to know about it. We aim to fill this need.

If I could do this all again I don't think I would do anything differently, except have more faith in myself and in the process. Also now that technology has changed so much since 2002 when we began the filmmaking, and very low cost high definition cameras and other technology are available and equipment reduced in size, and software that does all kinds of wonderful things, I would take advantage of many of these innovations to make things easier and faster. I would also budget far more money for post-production processes, legal/clearance rights and promotional costs. If you think your film will cost X amount of money, double that amount – that will be the more accurate budget!