Learning About the ‘People We See Every Day’

Grad student’s film takes revealing look at BC immigrant workers

BY ED HAVENHOLST STAFF WRITER

Well before immigration policy jumped to the forefront of America’s domestic policy debate in the spring of 2006, Susan Legere, a doctoral student in sociology, saw a story to tell in the experiences of the immigrants who work the jobs that make Boston College run on a daily basis.

Now, against the backdrop of a fiery political debate, Legere’s five-year project has produced a 50-minute documentary, “Immigrant Reflections,” which chronicles the experiences of three campus service workers who are immigrants to the US.

This Saturday, Oct. 20, the film will debut at the Boston Latino International Film Festival, where Legere and her subjects will also take part in a discussion about the film and the issues it raises.

Legere describes the project as an opportunity to learn more about people who might otherwise go unnoticed on campus. “Here are people we see every day, but don’t really see,” Legere says. “They make the place run, but they are in the background. So this is a chance to learn more about these people.”

The novice filmmaker, herself a first-generation college student, says the stories of the three subjects all reflect a common theme. “I think each one is a striking example of upward mobility and an incredible work ethic,” she says.

• Brigida “Vicky” Miranda is a native of Guatemala who works full-time in Dining Services. She and her husband, Cristobal Hernandez, who also works on campus as a security attendant for the Boston College Police Department, have two daughters. Miranda is now a student in the Woods College of Advancing Studies.

• Jorge Chacon, a native of Peru who had earned an accounting degree before immigrating to the US in his mid-20s, works in Facilities Services. He and his wife have two sons, one of whom graduated from the Carroll School of Management in 2007.

• Manuel “Manny” Alves, a native of Cape Verde, moved to Boston when he was 10. A graduate of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, he was a campus shuttle bus coordinator for Boston Coach before receiving a promotion to supervisor. He and his wife have a daughter.

In the film, the three subjects recall their journeys to the US, reunions with parents who spent years establishing their new homes, and the challenges they faced across issues of language, race and class as they settled in their new country.

Despite hardships, Chacon is grateful for his adopted country. “This country gave me a lot of opportunities to be something. The main thing it gave me the chance to prove to me [that] I’m good.”

Miranda and Chacon recall encountering rude or indifferent behavior from some students, but note that those who greet them by name or say “Thank you” for their efforts can make their day.

When she got the idea for her project, Legere, encouraged by Prof. Pamela Berger (Fine Arts), turned to the Jacques Salomonowicz Program for Mental Courage in Film, directed by Prof. John Michaleczky (Fine Arts), where she received technical advice and access to the equipment necessary to make the documentary.

Michaleczky says the documentary succeeds in exploring what the largely unseen dimensions of immigrants’ lives in Boston and at Boston College

“She does a very, very fine job in terms of tapping the resources of these individuals who can give us a better understanding” of the lives of immigrants in the Boston area,” he says. “We’re considered an ivory tower and we sometimes never reflect on people who come here who have these challenges. I think her documentary will help us come to a new understanding.”

For Legere, the project amounted to learning by doing. Securing subjects, conducting interviews, wielding the video and sound equipment. She did enlist the help of professional editor Eric Kightin of Living Reel Productions, and received a $500 grant from the University to defray some costs.

“I think this is a fantastic opportunity made available by BG,” says Legere. “If you have the interest to make a documentary about an important social topic, the opportunity is there for you.”

“Immigrant Reflections” plays at the Boston Latino International Film Festival at 5:30 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 20, at Boston University’s Howard Thurman Center, 775 Commonwealth Avenue. For more information, see www.bliff.org.