

Ad

Entertainment

Washington Immigration Film Festival presents stories behind the statistics

Alexandra Dixon, center, Rodrigo Brana and Patricia Absher are organizers of the new annual Greater Washington Immigration Film Festival. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

By **David Montgomery** July 18  [Follow @dmontyjr](#)

They hadn't heard of [IMDB](#), that trusty online movie database, and were unfamiliar with some top international cinema stars. But what they lacked in film-industry savvy, they more than made up for in passion and commitment.

Let's create the [Greater Washington Immigration Film Festival](#), they said.

And why not?

"I've always believed if you can imagine something, you can really make it happen," says Patricia Absher, co-chair of the [festival](#), who recently retired from the travel business she

Advertisement

built over 20 years.

It will be one of the few festivals in the country devoted to films about immigration: 13 works over four days, Oct. 23-26. Admission to all but one is free if you [order tickets](#) available online (www.immigrationfilmfest.org), or pay \$6 at the door. Keeping with the free ethos, the venues include churches and other donated spaces in the District, Virginia and Maryland.

Carolina Coria Rueda and her husband Javier Garcia talk about the dangers of crossing into the US through the Arizona desert in Roy Germano's documentary, "The Other Side of Immigration." (Courtesy Roy Germano)

The single event with a charge (\$25), even for pre-orders, includes a reception at GALA Hispanic

Theatre and a screening of the documentary "[Who Is Dayani Cristal?](#)" (2013), which was not widely seen in the Washington area. The title refers to tattoos on the body of an anonymous migrant found in the Arizona desert. Gael García Bernal attempts to identify the man and trace his journey.

"When we chose that film, we had no idea he was such a big person in the film business," Absher says.

Now they are trying to coax Bernal to attend the reception and introduce the film.

They never say "can't," this group of certified idealists. The members include co-chair Judith Johnson, who was the longtime director of the Green Door, the community-based mental health center in the District. There is a steering committee of 11 others, many drawn from the Washington Ethical Society or local Unitarian Universalist congregations.

[Finding Fela](#) ▾

[2.7% HARP 2.0
FIXED Rate](#)

harp-loan.freerateupdate.com
No Appraisal, No MAX LTV, 3.3 APR*.
Calculate New Rate/Payment 30 Secs

[Movie Ticket
Coupons](#) ▾

[Ver Tv En Vivo](#) ▾

[New Social Security
Card](#) ▾

[International
Students](#) ▾

[Free Blue Buffalo
Coupons](#) ▾

[5\) Foods Hurt The
Liver](#) ▾

The effort was born more than a year ago when a smaller group started meeting over a shared interest in immigration. They volunteered at [CASA de Maryland](#), where they helped young undocumented immigrants apply for the new federal program that would provide a chance to work legally.

They wanted to do more — to find a way to give more people a meaningful encounter with the human stories behind the statistics and the politics of immigration.

“Film is a way to entertain people while at the same time shift their consciousness a little bit,” Absher says.

They started doing Web searches for immigration films.

“Then we found out about IMDB,” Absher says. “That was a good source.”

The Fund for Unitarian Universalist Social Responsibility donated \$15,000, plus a \$5,000 matching grant that the festival organizers are fundraising to fulfill.

They considered about 200 films. For the first festival, they decided to highlight works from the past five years or so, presented primarily in English, with subtitles as needed.

They also looked beyond the experience of Mexicans and Central Americans. [“In America”](#) is about Irish newcomers; [“Amreeka”](#) is the story of a Palestinian mother and her teenage son; [“The Distance Between Us”](#) concerns Indian immigrants with visas for skilled workers; [“The Visitor”](#) tells of a lonely American professor who discovers a Syrian and a Senegalese squatter in his New York apartment.

The lineup includes mainstream features and more obscure pieces. [“A Better Life,”](#) stars Demián Bichir, who received a

2012 Oscar nomination for his role as a gardener trying to keep his son out of gang life. The festival offers a rare chance to see on-screen the science-fiction thriller [“Sleep Dealer,”](#) which had all but vanished until a [recent campaign](#) to distribute it digitally.

Advertisement

Notable documentaries include [“Papers,”](#) [“Harvest of Empire,”](#) [“AbUSed: The Postville Raid”](#) and [“Which Way Home,”](#) which was five years ahead of the headlines in following children on their journeys through Mexico.

Absher doesn’t expect every audience member to adopt her view that “a just immigration policy would acknowledge the 11 million [undocumented ones] who are already here and contributing enormously to the forward progress of our communities.”

It will be enough, she says, if moviegoers come out feeling they have glimpsed the world through an immigrant’s eyes, and say, “I have a part in the solution.”

David Montgomery joined The Washington Post in 1993. He currently writes general features and profiles for the Sunday Magazine, Sunday Style and Sunday Arts, with a focus on the Latino community and Latino arts.
