

Immigrant Filmmaker



YOUNG OBSERVER

Venezuelan American Teen's Film on Guatemalan Genocide Inspired by School Service Project

BY TOM TRACY
OSV News

A filmmaker and graduate of Miami Catholic schools with a new documentary film about Guatemalan-Mayan immigration to the U.S. said her project brought clarity to her own immigrant history as a Venezuelan American.

"For my family and many others, coming to the U.S. wasn't a choice we made lightly. We fled a country in crisis — a place where insecurity, political instability, and economic collapse made it impossible to live safely," said Victoria Alonso Noujaim, a 2021 graduate of Immaculata-La Salle High School in Miami and writer-director of an award-winning short film, "The Miami Kids and the Maya."

The film premiered Oct. 19 at the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in West Palm Beach — close to the Guatemalan Mayan community that first formed here some 30 years ago and found employment mostly in Florida's agricultural industry.

In the film, Alonso Noujaim tells the story of her discovery, as a high school student, of the families and survivors of 1980s Guatemala genocide against Indigenous people and their linguistic, economic and legal struggles in the United States.

The documentary has received several prestigious awards and recognitions for its impactful storytelling and visual artistry.

Currently a junior at Georgia's Savannah College of Art and Design, best known



(OSV News photos/courtesy Victoria Alonso Noujaim)

This is an image from the documentary "The Miami Kids and the Maya," produced by Victoria Alonso Noujaim, a filmmaker and graduate of Immaculata-La Salle High School in Miami.

as SCAD, Alonso Noujaim is majoring in film, cinema and video studies.

She said her parents are filmmakers themselves and that she grew up helping them on projects, including music video production and other films in the Spanish-speaking market. They continued filmmaking as they began establishing themselves in Miami after leaving behind the turbulent transition to a socialist dictatorship in their native Venezuela.

After attending Catholic schools in Caracas, Alonso Noujaim said her father moved the family to the U.S. where she spent a disorienting year or so in Florida public schools before her parents enrolled her at Immaculata-La Salle High, a Miami archdiocesan co-ed school.

There she enlisted in the school's volunteerism club called SALTT, which stands for Service and Leadership for Today and Tomorrow. For the first time, she felt an

awakening of her Catholic faith through heart-wrenching encounters with other migrant communities and the impoverished circumstances in which they often lived.

"I learned service isn't just about doing community hours — it was about actually living our values and helping our neighbors; I realized that this was the faith I connected with," Alonso Noujaim told the *Florida Catholic*, Miami's archdiocesan news outlet.

She first came in contact with Guatemalans through a volunteer project in Palm Beach County and the Guatemalan-Maya Center, a decades-old community hub and nonprofit advocacy center for displaced Guatemalans in the city of Lake Worth.

She recalled sitting in the dilapidated home of a Guatemalan family near West Palm Beach and reflecting on her immigration experience.

"I remember one time I was sitting in one of the homes of

families — and most of the trailers were barely holding together — seeing how they fled their country, losing loved ones, and thinking I was going to help them," she said. "I realized they helped me in a way, by opening this experience for me as not just another (school) requirement."

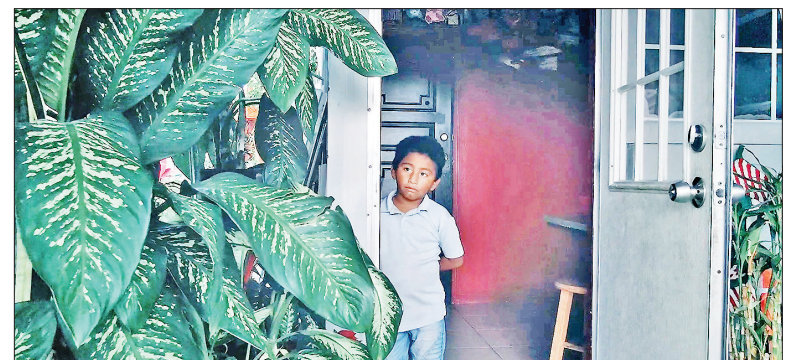
During the 1970s and 1980s, the Guatemalan genocide, also referred to as the Maya genocide, involved the mass killing of the Maya indigenous people during the Guatemalan Civil War by successive Guatemalan military governments. The

repression reached genocidal levels in the predominantly Indigenous northern provinces, according to U.N. reports, with an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans killed during the war and at least 40,000 persons "disappeared."

"I think so many of us as immigrants faced similar struggles and trying to build a new life in a new country. Meeting that community really opened my eyes because you see people taking different paths, not flying here as I did, but taking a dangerous route," said Alonso Noujaim.

Alonso Noujaim said she would love to one day make a film about her beloved Venezuela. But, after the country's recent contentious elections, she realizes it will not be without controversy.

"It's definitely a sensitive topic but an important one to address, especially given all the coverage lately. The reality is that Venezuelans, like any immigrant community, are diverse," Alonso Noujaim said. "We come from different walks of life, with different stories, challenges and reasons for being here."



An image from the documentary "The Miami Kids and the Maya" shows a young Guatemalan child.

Over 200 Teens Prepare for Confirmation

WEST DUNDEE— Over 200 teens from seven parishes gathered at St. Catherine of Siena Parish for a confirmation retreat Oct. 26. Led by the Franciscans of the Eucharist of Chicago and three diocesan seminarians — Deacon Ian Ordoñez, Deacon Ryan Nooraee, and Bailey Peterson — the retreat included Mass, adoration, confession and many inspiring talks.



(Photo provided/Jan Olson)



(Photo provided/Amy Ott)

Boylan Welcomes 11 into National Honor Society

ROCKFORD—Boylan Central Catholic High School inducted 11 new members into the National Honor Society on Oct. 21. Those selected are evaluated by the faculty on their scholarship, service, leadership, and character. The newly inducted students, from left to right, are (top row) Tommy Ngo, Tyler Marquez, Charles Maier, Noah Hakanson, Alexander Cardenas, Max Pham, (bottom row) Mia Carlson, Holly Ports, Anna Shiels, Betsy Millan, and Addisen Lawrence.

—Provided by Amy Ott, Boylan Central Catholic High School president.