

**Stories of the Nicaraguan Civil War**  
**Matagalpa, Nicaragua**  
**Princeton University**  
**Luciana Chamorro, Class of 2012, Nicaragua**  
[www.veinte21.com](http://www.veinte21.com)

### Final Written Report

The goal of this project was to provide a space for Nicaraguan youth to reflect on the country's recent history through documentary filmmaking, and to transfer practical skills that could be applied in other multimedia projects to address social issues in the future. No other funds were required.

This project had three main stages:

First was the documentation, design of the curriculum and organization of the logistics for the four-week workshop to be held in Matagalpa, Nicaragua. This process took about two and a half months. I started by reading about different community filmmaking experiences and their methodologies, and consulting with a diverse group of people willing to offer feedback both on the methods and the content I was proposing. Next, I sent out invitation letters to different documentary filmmakers and scholars where I proposed that they facilitate a component of the workshop, and then worked with them on their specific content. Thus the design and implementation of the workshop became a collaborative experience, and I was very lucky to have very experienced people involved. Logistically, my main concern early on was attracting participants, ages 16-25 years old that were motivated by the different components of the project –both an interest in filmmaking as a tool to address social issues, and an interest in Nicaragua's recent history. I was surprised and impressed by the people who submitted applications, and their current personal project commitments in which they are actively working towards a more just society.

The second stage was implementation of the workshop. The first week was dedicated to introducing the genre of Documentary filmmaking, and the issues of representation that arise with it: What is truth? Does documentary film depict reality? We had this discussion thinking specifically about how to represent memory or history within documentary. Who writes history and from where? Who has memory? What histories of the revolution and the civil war do we know? Where do we learn these narratives? What impact do they have in our lives? It was imperative that they had some sense of how memories circulate in the public sphere and build "history": the role of institutions such as schools and their own family narratives. The participants were then divided into four groups, started thinking about topics, and began the research process.

One of the goals of the workshop was for participants to construct a "way of seeing" the past that was their own, so I let them run with their ideas. They had autonomy in the entire process, with the sole constraint that the projects had to somehow engage with the past. However, I came across the challenge of how to keep a balance between letting them learn for themselves and offering guidance. The main doubt feeding this question was whether my concerns and motivations to approach this subject were also important to other young people. I soon found that they too were frustrated by the fact that youth feel disauthorized to ask or reflect on the past, and that "we" as a generation are called "apathetic" and "individualistic" for not having unified collective projects to work towards. Approaching history allowed us to gain perspective: concerns about what we inherited as a youth emerged, particularly about the leadership structures that became the legacy of the militarization and violence that was lived through, and what this meant for familial relationships. We began to recognize ourselves as individuals who had been somehow touched by this war, and who lived within a society –and within families– that have not been able to discuss what it lived through openly. In response, all (but one group) decided they were going to make films about their own families.

The second and third week were dedicated to learning the technical aspects of documentary filmmaking and in narrowing down the ideas for each film. We finished the second week with solid literary and technical scripts, ready to shoot. In the fourth week we filmed the projects. In the fifth week, we traveled to the capital, Managua, to edit the films. This aspect was not part of my original plan, but it was incorporated because the participants were eager to learn the basics of video editing, and I had access to an editing lab at the Centro Cultural España (CCEN), in Managua. In short, they ended seeing their films through until the end. The projects are not as tightly edited as if professionals had done them,

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but for the participants, this was a fantastic experience. They feel extremely proud of what they accomplished.

The third stage was the design of the webpage and the distribution of the film. A first open-invitation screening was organized in Matagalpa. Participants and their families came, as did protagonists of the films, with the room filled to overflowing. There, I realized that the project had actually gone beyond having an impact on the participants themselves. The premise of my idea, which is that the camera becomes an excuse to establish connections and relationships, proved to work. I heard the testimonies of family members who expressed that there are things shared in the film that they had not had the courage to share before, not even within their families.

What's next? The participants have moved on to conform a filmmaking collective called Veinte21 (twenty21), which is a reference to a generational shift, a shift of visions. They are planning to continue making social issues films, some of which continue to explore their family histories, and others who want to move on to address issues as broad as homophobia, or the life in the local trash-dump, where many Matagalpans live and work. Four of the participants were already involved with a program called Agents of Change where they conduct a local television program. As for me, I want to replicate this experience. so I will be writing a short paper that will be submitted to a visual anthropology journal, and I am applying to a PhD program in Anthropology where I am presenting a research proposal that derives from this experience. Furthermore, this has been my first time facilitating a classroom space, and I am very excited for the prospects of continuing to teach, both at the High school and university level.

Peace in Nicaragua has been defined as the lack of war; thus, it is said that peace was achieved in 1990. But war is so much more than the overt use of physical violence. War produces anger. War is pain. War antagonizes. War divides. War is experienced by individuals who continue living and cannot "shut off" what they saw, what they did, what they wish they hadn't done. They have continued living to become the parents and grandparents of a generation that did not live these events, but that has the memory. I myself feel part of this "post-generation" that is affected by the past through our parents: their ways of establishing relationships, of expressing their love, their optimism and distrust, etc. The effects of war are complex, and in this same complex way, peace is so much more than the absence of physical violence.

Peace is being able to recognize that one's happiness depends on the wellbeing of those around you. Peace is communication and mutual understanding. Peace means embracing difference as part of the richness of humanity. Peace is an attitude towards life, and thus, peace building lies in making a decision on how to approach the past. Our collective past is part of who we are as individuals, and thus peace lies in being able to shift gears. **My project was successful in that it allowed other young people to recognize their own past, and through that recognition, become empowered to choose peace. To choose the Nicaragua they want to move towards. They decided to document the stories, the heroes in their own lives and make them the protagonists of their films.** Among them are a grandmother who turned her house into a "safe house" for young people who were fighting to free Nicaragua from the Somoza dictatorship in the 1970's, a mother who delivered undercover messages in the struggle against the dictatorship, and another mother who, at age 16, taught 15 adults to read during the 1981 literacy brigade. These stories all speak of small acts of solidarity that were able to produce change within the mist of war. The discovery of extraordinary stories lived by ordinary people reminds us that we are all extraordinary and that there is potential in each and every one of us to carry peace through our actions. The workshop overall makes a statement: we want to be a generation able to recognize the complexity of our history, but also able to choose to take that part of history upon which we can build a future.

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Osiris, Eyling, Luciana and Cynthia preparing to start shooting one of the films titled *Mama Amanda*, which is the story of one of the participant's grandmother during the war.



Group picture with Natalia Hernandez, a documentary producer who came to talk to us about how to write technical scripts.



Pablo and Alicia eating tamales and chatting with Ms. Mercedes after a long day shooting in Ocalca, a small village North of Matagalpa.