

cuba 1961

250,000 volunteer teachers join the national literacy campaign. Almost half of them were under 18 and over half of them were women. Together they taught a nation to read and write – and their lives would never be the same.

MAESTRA is a 33-minute documentary that explores the experience of nine women who, as young girls, taught on the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961. Through current day interviews from in their homes in Havana, archival film footage and still photos, we look at this moment and how it changed their lives as women.

Our characters are Daysi Veitia, Gina Rey, Norma Guillard, Eloisa Hernandez, Adria & Ivonne Santana, Blanca Monett, Diana Balboa and Griselda Aguilera. We also meet Tina Gomez and her two sons, who live in the Sierra Maestra mountain range of Cuba, and housed a literacy volunteer in their home.

The film begins with archival footage from the UN General Assembly in September 1960, when Cuba announced that they would eradicate illiteracy in one year. They made an open call for volunteer teachers, with a massive media campaign that went all over the country. Over 250,000 Cuban citizens volunteered – 100,000 of the volunteers were under 18 and

over half of were women. Interviews, recorded testimonials, and powerful archival footage that took years to compile, tell this story that personifies the hopes and dreams of a nation and the will and courage of the young women who made this monumental endeavor possible.

Cuba of the 1950s was dominated by a staunchly patriarchal family structure. Most of the young women's families refused to let them go to the mountainous regions in a time of such uncertainty. So they entered into an intense process of negotiation with their families, fighting for a degree of autonomy and independence that had rarely been allowed for Cuban women before then. It was a teenage girl uprising.

They went for two-week teacher training at Varadero, a beach town on the northern coast of Cuba, and then off to mountains and valleys across the island to their teaching assignments. They lived with the families who they would teach, working alongside them in the fields during the daytime & teaching classes (often by kerosene lantern) on nights and weekends.

The young teachers faced many challenges & difficulties. There were women whose husbands forbade them to study, elderly

farmers who could not hold a pencil, and the daily challenges of rural life. There were also very real dangers. In the midst of the Literacy Campaign, the Bay of Pigs was invaded. Although the invasion did not succeed, armed confrontations continued across Cuba. In the Escambray Mountains, six months after the Bay of Pigs invasion, one young literacy teacher was killed along with the campesino Pedro Lantigua, that he was teaching to read and write.

In spite of the growing dangers, the majority of young teachers refused to leave, and stayed on in the communities where they were teaching, finishing out the year-long campaign. Their eyes sparkle as they share beautiful, moving – and sometimes funny – stories of teaching their students to write the alphabet, to sign their names, or to spell the name of their country, Cuba.

The story ends with the protagonists talking about how this experience changed their lives and their sense of themselves. They speak profoundly about how it changed the way they saw themselves as women, their notions about what they could strive for in life. And all of them insist this was the most important thing they have ever done.



maestra director's statement

My grandmother and great-aunt were raised in the Cuban province of Camaguey at the turn of the 20th Century. Daughters of North American parents living in Cuba, they spoke Spanish like Cubans. I grew up very close to them, and was raised on their stories of Cuba, passing on to me a love for the beautiful island, its traditions, language and people.

I found my way to Cuba twenty years later, earned a Masters Degree, and lived and worked there for many years to follow. I was in Cuba on September 11, 2001 and remember the deep sorrow and fear shared by the world. I was worried for the world. In searching for models of hope, I was struck by an incredible story that touched me in Cuba - a story of hope that I wanted to share.

I heard some murmurings over the years at a friend's home in Havana. His mother, Daysi Veitia, then in her early 60s, had been part of a singularly historical social phenomenon in Cuba. As a teenager in 1961, she volunteered to teach reading and writing in the Eastern mountains of Cuba. As I delved into her story, I found that several women I knew from that generation had been part of the campaign. In 1961, 250,000 people volunteer teachers set

out to teach their nation to read, as part of the most ambitious literacy campaign in history. Half of them were teenagers and over half were women. Cuba became the first country to eradicate illiteracy and young people were at the heart of this enormous feat.

Inspired by these stories, I had to record them. In 2004, on my last day in Cuba, with a cinematographer, sound engineer, homemade boom and my own Panasonic DVX100, we did three interviews in the homes of former volunteer teachers. Two weeks later, I started to edit. I fell in love with their stories and knew this was a much bigger project. From 2004 to 2010, we interviewed more than 50 volunteer teachers from the Literacy Campaign and some of the families they taught to read and write. The first three interviews that we recorded made the final cut, along with six other extraordinary women and one of the families they lived with. The archival footage and stills were collected over five years of exhaustive research in Cuban and US archives. We sought out the living photographers from that era. One of them, Liborio Noval, photographed the closing march of the campaign, and shot the beautiful image of the sea of pencils and shining faces.

This is not just a story about literacy. This story is about hopes and dreams. It is about youth empowerment and women's empowerment and about what is possible. It about young people who threw themselves into the seemingly impossible, and helped build a new society at the age of 17. The women we interviewed have diverse opinions today, and many have made great achievements, but every one of them insists that this was the most important thing they have ever done.

MAESTRA is a living project. We continue to research and interview teachers and students, gathering more testimonies. We continue to search for archival materials and sources. Through our mother organization, The Literacy Project (www.literacyproject.org), we will use MAESTRA as a tool for inspiration and social change and to collaborate with communities where illiteracy is an ongoing problem.

My commitment is to make this film available to schools, teachers, and literacy organizations worldwide.

But my greatest hope is that this documentary will move people - especially young people - to realize they can do great things - to even change the course of history.



maestra director/producer

catherine murphy

Catherine Murphy is a San Francisco-based filmmaker who has spent much of the last twenty years working in Latin America. Murphy lived and worked in Cuba in the 1990's, earning a Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Havana. Currently, Murphy is an adjunct professor at NYU's Center for Global Affairs and founder/director of The Literacy Project.

THE LITERACY PROJECT is non-profit multi-media project devoted to the topic of adult literacy in the Americas, founded by Murphy in response to the magnitude of adult illiteracy in North and South America. Since 2003, The Literacy Project has focused on researching and recording oral histories of volunteer teachers from the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign, to date the most ambitious and successful national effort to eradicate illiteracy. This phase of The Literacy Project has culminated in the production the documentary film, MAESTRA. Catherine Murphy, along with one of the cast members of the film, Norma Guillard, take on speaking engagements, touring with clips of the film, and addressing issues of literacy in cultural, academic and political forums. MAESTRA

also had a web-based oral history archive in the works. Eduardo Galeano, in his recent book *Espejos*, features four short stories based on the interviews from Cuba.

As an independent film professional, Murphy's work has largely focused on social documentaries as a producer, translator, subtitle supervisor and associate producer. Her film credits include: *Gay Cuba*, *The Greening of Cuba*, *Venezuela Rising*, *Stealing America* (dir. Dorothy Fadiman), *Out and Refusenicks* (dir. Sonja de Vries). She is the associate producer on *Ghost Town to Havana* (dir. Eugene Corr) and *Will the Real Terrorist Please Stand Up* (dir. Saul Landau). Murphy recently served as the archival researcher for Susanne Rostock's biography of Harry Belafonte, *Sing Your Song*.

Over the past decade, Murphy's work in Cuba has included the design and execution of dozens of academic and cultural exchange programs for US-based universities, non-profit and cultural institutions. Most recently, she was advisor to the Cuba Residency for Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. In 2006, Murphy served

as senior producer at the TeleSur TV Washington DC Bureau, and has produced content for Pacifica Radio National, TeleSur TV, Avila TV and WBAI. In 2009, while working and living in Caracas, Murphy founded *Tres Musas Producciones*, a collaborative production house of independent women producers working together in film, music and literature.

Currently, Catherine Murphy is devoting 100% of her time to MAESTRA and The Literacy Project. Having already screened at Cuba's world-renowned festivals, The International Festival of New Latin American Film in Havana, and *Festival de Cine Pobre* (Low Budget Film Festival) in Gibara, Holguin, MAESTRA will screen at festivals in the US and abroad during 2012 and 2013. Murphy, along with Norma Guillard are already scheduled to speak at conferences and universities across the US during International Women's Month (March) in 2013 and will continue to strive toward the eradication of illiteracy in the Americas.

NORMA GUILLARD *15 Years old in 1961*

A social psychologist from Santiago de Cuba, Guillard was one of the first Cuban women of her generation to call herself a Feminist, and today primarily works on issues of gender, race, sexual orientation and the importance of diversity in a Cuban/Caribbean context. An Afro-Cuban woman, Guillard has contributed much to the lively debates on race and racism in Cuba. An adjunct professor at the University of Havana teaching psychology and gender, and past president of the Cuban Association of Psychologists, she is also an advisor to United Nations Development Program and UNESCO on gender and HIV/AIDS prevention. She is a principal collaborator at the National Center for the AIDS Prevention and the National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX), which spearheads work to educate against homophobia and lobby for civil unions in Cuba. She is an avid speaker at conferences, educational, social and cultural forums worldwide. Norma will be actively engaged in a presenting MAESTRA, including an upcoming US speaking tour for Women's History Month in March 2013.

DIANA BALBOA *15 Years old in 1961*

A Native of Havana, Diana Balboa is an internationally renowned painter, whose works form part of museum and private collections in ten countries, over 20 personal exhibitions and works in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Cuba. Her work is deeply rooted in her Cuban culture and reflects her experiences both graphically and pictorially. Her career as a fine artist began with engraving but evolved to painting where she quickly gained recognition. Diana was among the first openly proud member of the LGBT community in Cuba and a strong supporter of gay and lesbian rights on the island and abroad.

ELOISA HERNANDEZ *12 years old in 1961*

Eloisa is from the town of Caimanera, the closest town to Guantánamo Naval Base in Eastern Cuba. Her parents owned a small provisions shop in Caimanera, and Eloisa grew up surrounded by North Americans, who exposed her to the English language at an early age. Consequently, her English is perfect. Eloisa grew up to become a translator, which she does to this day, participating in numerous historic events.

DAYSY VEITIA *17 years old in 1961*

Daysy was the original inspiration for MAESTRA and the first recorded interview. A native of Havana, Daysy and her sister were both volunteer teachers in the campaign. Daysy went on to become a renowned architect specializing in Hospitals. Two of her most relevant projects are the planning of a National Network of Emergency/Trauma Centers during the 1981 Dengue epidemic and the dedicated building for the Havana Eye Microsurgery Institute also in the mid 1980s. She passed away before the film could be completed, but her contribution and the inspiration she provided are what made MAESTRA possible.

BLANCA MONETT *14 years old in 1961*

From Havana, Blanca was one of the volunteer teachers that went out to extremely remote area far up in the mountains of Cuba. There, she forged a relationship with a family that would never have otherwise been exposed to education. She later became a medical secretary, and devotes much of her personal life to painting and traditional crafts. This experience remained the most moving and important thing that she had ever done, and contributed greatly to the adult that she became.

cast

IVONNE SANTANA *16 years old in 1961*

From the small town of Las Tunas, Ivonne forged the permission slips for herself and her younger sister, Adria. Ivonne moved to Havana shortly after the literacy campaign with her younger sister and, inspired by her experience on the campaign, studied to become a teacher. Ivonne remained very connected to her sister for the rest of her life and still resides in Havana.

GRISELDA AGUILERA *7 years old in 1961*

Griselda was in second grade when she saw the droves of young people euphorically going off to alphabetize the nation and insisted on volunteering for the campaign. Obviously too young to be sent out to the countryside, Griselda was given one student whom she taught to read and write in her home. His name was Carlos Perez and he was 58 years old. The experience stayed with her and profoundly contributed to her personal and social development. Griselda later became a math teacher, and has wholeheartedly dedicated her life to teaching ever since.

ADRIA SANTANA *13 years old in 1961*

From the small town of Las Tunas, Adria left home with her sister Ivonne behind their parent's backs to join the literacy campaign. Like her sister, she moved to Havana immediately after the campaign where she attended the newly formed National Art School. Adria went on to become a leading international stage, television and film actress, receiving critical acclaim and awards for her performances, spanning four decades, from institutions the likes of the New York Association of Theater Critics, the International Monologue/Performance Festival of Miami the Alejo Carpentier Order of Cuba, to name a few. The Low Budget Film Festival in Cuba (El Festival de Cine Pobre) has recently created the Adria Santana Award for outstanding acting in her honor. Adria passed away in 2011 after a long battle with breast cancer, but her legacy remains in the plethora of social, cultural and human contributions she made during her lifetime.

GINA REY *14 years old in 1961*

Originally from the city of Santa Clara, Gina became an urban planner. She is a major proponent of the "Greening of Cuba", a powerful sustainability movement on the island today. She was a founding member of the Group for Comprehensive Development of the Capital (GCIC), promoting urban planning and architecture that takes environmental issues into consideration. She is responsible, among many other ground-breaking projects, for La Arboleda (The Grove), a community on the outskirts of Havana, built among the trees that exist there (instead of cutting them down), and is a major spokesperson nationally and internationally in favor of environmental consciousness in urban development and architecture.

WRITER/EDITOR**EVE GOLDBERG** (San Francisco)

Eve Goldberg has worked as a producer, director, writer and editor for film and television for over 25 years. Her credits include Oscar-winning documentaries and Emmy-nominated TV programs, as well as video production for community and non-profit organizations. She is the sole owner of Cottonwood Shadow Productions. Ms. Goldberg's credits include: *Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist* (writer/editor, Emmy nomination); *Cover-Up: Behind the Iran/Contra Affair* (writer/editor, winner Gold Hugo/Chicago Int'l Film Festival); *Panama Deception* (story consultant, Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary).

CINEMATOGRAPHER**ROBERTO CHILE** (Havana)

Roberto Chile is one of Cuba's most accomplished documentary filmmakers and cinematographers. He has written and directed dozens of documentaries, news clips and short films on Cuban and current affairs. His credits include *Sencillamente Korda*, *Desafío*, and *En mis ojos brillas tu*, to name only a few. In 2008 he created the project *Alas con puntas* (Wings with brushes) to showcase the esthetic and social values of the Cuban artists of today through

the creation of short and medium format films. Chile has worked with countless Cuban and foreign production companies including ICAIC, Tres Musas Producciones, ABC, CBS, NBC, Discovery Channel, TV Ashi of Japan, O Globo, Canal Arte of France and many more.

CINEMATOGRAPHER**IVAN NÁPOLES** (Havana)

Ivan Nápoles' career as a cinematographer began in 1960 and spans four decades of Cuban film. He was a principal cinematographer for the historic Noticiero Latinoamericano del ICAIC, recording over one thousand Noticieros between 1960 and 1991. Nápoles was Director of Photography for numerous classic documentary films by acclaimed Cuban documentary-maker, Santiago Alvarez, including *Historia de un Ballet*, *Abril de Giron*, *79 Primaveras*, *Hanoi Martes 13*, *Cerro Pelado*, *Leo Brower*, *Ciclón* and many more. Nápoles holds numerous international awards for cinematography including the coveted Caracol (Photography) from UNEAC (Union Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba).

PRODUCER**RUBEN CARREÑO** (Havana)

Ruben Carreño began his career with ICAIC in production during the late 1970's where he

quickly became a specialist in camera equipment and honing his knowledge and skills in film production. After completing a degree in commerce, Ruben returned to ICAIC where he has worked ever since. He has been producer on numerous award-winning feature films and documentaries such as: *Habana Blues*, *Boleto al paraíso*, *Nazin Hikment* and *Danza del alma* to name a few.

CO-PRODUCER**MIRIAM MACHADO-LUCES** (Washington DC)

A Native of Venezuela, "Mimi" Machado-Luces is an Emmy-award winning producer, writer, director who has developed programming, created content, promotional campaigns and advertising for Viacom, BET Networks and other media outlets for over two decades. Holding a degree in journalism and business management from Howard University, she is a documentary filmmaker and freelance producer whose clients include the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Double Back Films, KAB Productions, and the EPA to name a few. Her film credits include: *Aid-de-Camp*, *Caribbean Visionary* and *30 Years of Women Making Film in DC*. She is on the board of directors of DC Women in Film.

CO-PRODUCER**KOFI TAHA** (Boston)

Kofi Taha is the Associate Director of D-Lab, a program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that focuses on the design of low-cost, high impact technologies in water, sanitation, and agriculture, benefiting people living in poverty. Programs of his design are currently in practice in Uganda, Zambia, Ghana, Haiti and Cambodia. Prior to shifting to international development, Kofi worked in music management and film and video production. He worked as line producer, unit manager or production assistant on over fifty music videos and three films, including Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* and Robert De Niro's *A Bronx Tale*. He managed recording artist Meshell N'degeocello for five years, serving as executive producer on three Grammy nominated albums. Kofi's helped produce the International Hip Hop Exchange benefits to support cultural exchanges between the U.S. and Cuba. Kofi studied political science at Columbia University and urban planning at MIT; he is originally from the Bronx, New York.

DIRECTOR'S ASSISTANT + WEBMASTER**YEIBER CANO** (San Francisco/Caracas)

Yeiber Cano, originally from Caracas, Venezuela, and is a recent graduate of San Francisco State University TV and Radio Broadcasting Program. A custom web developer, video editor/producer and graphic designer, Yeiber has taken on a wide range of projects for community organizations and corporations like Pandora.com and CGI.com. He is a media consultant and supporter of community media projects. His credits include Street Soldiers Radio, Abyayala Productions and La Bohemia Productions.

DIRECTOR'S ASSISTANT**GABRIELA LUZ SIERRA** (San Francisco)

Gabriela Sierra is a first generation Cuban-American. She holds a BA in International Relations from San Francisco State University and a Certificate in Spanish Philology from Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Sierra has interned at Link TV and has been a research assistant and journalist at Acción Latina, and was an assistant marketing coordinator at ABC Radio. She now works at the National Museum of Women in San Francisco.

PRODUCTION ASSISTANTS

Malena Barrios, Arlen Benjamin-Gomez, Cristina Carasquillo, Arsenio Castillo, Ivonne Chapman Mil, Ricardo Figueredo,

INTERNS

Rosanna Figueroa, Rebecca Herman, Jesse Meadows, Annery Rivera, Tamara Rosenblum, Toni Ruiz-Firmat, Mariah Tuffey, Ireece Underwood, Katrina Wong

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