

NOEMI FIGUEROA  
THE STORYTELLER

+ Noemi Figueroa is the documentarian behind *The Borinqueneers*.



MARIO FERRER/DAVID HUBEAUT

Noemi Figueroa got the idea after taking a walk with her husband's uncle from Puerto Rico, and noticing that he limped. She asked a few questions and learned he had been wounded in the Korean War, taken prisoner and awarded a Purple Heart. It wasn't just that he was a war hero; it was that few would have guessed it.

"I had noticed over the years that Latino soldiers are rarely represented, not in movies or documentaries," says Figueroa, whose documentary *The Borinqueneers* began airing nationwide in August. Zooming in on the 65th Infantry Regiment, the film distills

hundreds of interviews to explore the Puerto Rican military experience through the eyes of veterans and their families.

The segregated unit suffered heavy casualties in Korea and was also bruised by the controversial court-martials of several of its soldiers who refused to fight without proper artillery and medical support. The Army eventually pardoned them. Part of Figueroa's mission was to clarify the events around those cases.

"They made a mark, and they impressed officials," says Figueroa. "I started discovering that eventually the 65th was the pride of Puerto Rico."

Perhaps a reflection of the under-crediting Hispanics have received for their military role, Figueroa's tallest hurdle in making the film was securing funding. A New

York actress and marketing consultant, she started the documentary nine years ago on a shoestring budget and finished thanks to volunteers, grants and even \$10 donations from veterans.

Picked up by PBS, the documentary has played nationwide, propelling Figueroa across the map for screenings. On October 14, it also played to an audience of 850,000 troops on the Armed Forces Network.

Figueroa says her greatest satisfaction, though, came in a call from a veteran who had been told at a Red Lobster restaurant that his dinner was on the house.

"They were Anglos who had seen the film," Figueroa says of the restaurant staff. "They said, 'We can't take your money. You're a war hero' ... That's what this film has accomplished." +