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Retired Sgt. 1st Class Luis A. Colon, from left, a member of the 65th Infantry Regiment, talks with filmmaker Noemi Figueroa Soulet and Col. Gilberto Villahermosa, inspector general of the Massachusetts National Guard, during a showing of the documentary, "The Borinqueneers," at Clark University last night.

Documentary honors soldiers

Pride swells at premiere at Clark

By Kelly Glista
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

WORCESTER — As the first words of their anthem rang through the auditorium, the audience began to sing.

Not "The Star-Spangled Banner" — that had already been sung and the room had listened with quiet respect. Now, they were singing proudly to "La Borinquena," the anthem of Puerto Rico.

The songs were part of the opening ceremonies last night for the premiere of the documentary, "The Borinqueneers" about the U.S. Army's 65th Infantry Regiment. Held at Clark University, the premiere was the only showing of the film in Massachusetts.

The regiment, nicknamed

WORCESTER

The Borinqueneers, began as the Puerto Rico Battalion of Volunteer Infantry in 1899. In 1908, the unit became part of the U.S. Army. Its soldiers, who made up one of very few ethnically based regiments in the Army, have fought in World War I, World War II and the Korean War. For their service in Korea, soldiers in the regiment received four Distinguished Service crosses, 125 Silver Stars, Presidential and Meritorious Unit commendations, two Korean Presidential Unit Citations and the Greek Gold Medal for Bravery.

The film documents the story of this regiment through interviews with soldiers and archived footage, with narration by the award-winning actor Hector Elizondo. The DVD also features Spanish narration.

Film writer, director and producer Noemi Figueroa Soulet said that the film is an

important legacy.

"These men are dying," she said. "And as they die, so do their stories."

Six of the 24 men interviewed in the documentary have since died, said Ms. Figueroa Soulet, and there are still many people that have never even heard of the 65th regiment.

Col. Gilberto Villahermosa, inspector general of the Massachusetts National Guard, was the guest speaker last night. He said it is important to pass along the Borinqueneers' story.

"I still think there are aspects of some historical truth that aren't known," he said.

The story of the soldiers is more than just their service in war; it is also the story of a unit facing an era of segregation and prejudice. Ms. Figueroa Soulet said people don't realize the long history of Puerto Rican service in the military, and how much it affects the entire country.

"This is bigger than me, and

it's bigger than them," she said.

The most important part of the film was the visuals, said Ms. Figueroa Soulet, describing a scene in which a Puerto Rican soldier quickly and skillfully climbs a palm tree.

"Now that's a Caribbean soldier," she said with a smile.

Co-producer and director Raquel Ortiz said the pictures of the young soldiers were the most touching.

"They were all so full of pride, and so handsome, and so ready," she said.

Before the premiere, a brief reception was held, attended by Ms. Figueroa Soulet and Ms. Ortiz as well as the members of the 65th Infantry Regiment in Korea Commemoration Group in Worcester and political figures from all over Massachusetts, including Worcester Mayor Konstantina B. Lukes. The ceremonies were conducted in both English and Spanish.

The documentary will be shown on PBS in September.