

Noemi Figueroa, Borinqueneers & the Woman Who Fought to Tell Their Story

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December 9, 2016



Noemi Figueroa Producer of "The Borinqueneers"

Millions of Americans watched the Ken Burns PBS series *The War* and probably learned more about World War II than they did from any history book. But in 14 hours aired over seven days, there is a glaring omission.

"PBS was getting a lot of heat because Ken Burns...did not interview one Hispanic WWII veteran," said filmmaker Noemi Figueroa. "That was shameful."

A grassroots protest was initiated by the Mexican American community, primarily. Half a million Latinos served in World War II. PBS was getting public money and they felt that this was an oversight that was unacceptable.

But even before the Burns series aired, around the time *Saving Private Ryan* came out in 1998, Figueroa had the idea of making a film about Puerto Rican soldiers.

"There was no Latino representation, there was no profile of the Latino experience," she remembers.

Thus, Figueroa decided to make a documentary film about this overlooked chapter in American history. She had no idea the project would take nine years to finish. Nor did she anticipate that she'd spend the *next* nine years of her life witnessing the documentary's consequences.

"This was not a little subject," she says of *The Borinqueneers*, a film about the segregated Puerto Rican 65th infantry regiment of the U.S. Army. "It was a big, ambitious project that encompassed over a hundred years: the regiment started in 1899, covered three world wars, and had a lot of footage.... I was crazy!"

But as the years went by, Figueroa bonded with her subjects, veterans whose stories had never been told, not even in Puerto Rico. Many told her that she was the first person to ever ask them about their wartime service.

"They were depending on me to tell their story," she recalled.

The fact that Figueroa came across their stories in the first place is a tale all its own. She was born in Puerto Rico and grew up in New York City's El Barrio neighborhood. She had two uncles who had served in Vietnam and her father, a soldier with the 33rd infantry regiment, had been stationed in Panama during the Korean War. Their experiences were a point of departure for her research, which led her to a Bronx library where she stumbled upon a book that had one paragraph about the 65th infantry regiment, known as the Borinqueneers. It wasn't long before she realized she'd found her documentary subject.

As she embarked upon her research, both on the mainland and in Puerto Rico, she found that few had heard of the Borinqueneers.

"This was a story that needed to be told," she said. "These men had been forgotten. They were our heroes and they needed to be profiled and recognized. The Borinqueneers served as U.S. soldiers. They were U.S. citizens."

Years of research, fund raising and interviews culminated in *The Borinqueneers*, but finishing it didn't guarantee it would find an audience. For one thing, Figueroa was a first-time filmmaker. For another, there were lots of gatekeepers standing in the way; many of them simply weren't interested in giving Latinos their due within the larger historical narrative. It took the controversy over the Ken Burns series, along with one passionate Latino executive at PBS to finally bring *The Borinqueneers* to Americans' living rooms in 2007.

"A Latino in a high position at PBS saw value in *The Borinqueneers* and was the person who gave it the green light. In many ways, my film helped improve their image," she says.

Since the airing of *The Borinqueneers* nearly a decade ago, Figueroa has witnessed what she describes as the documentary's ripple effects, the most recent and significant of which was the conferring of the Congressional Gold Medal on Borinqueneer veterans this past April.

"I would have never imagined that would have happened. I'd like to think the film led to that," she says. "The lesson from this is that we have to tell our own stories."

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