

MOVING PICTURES STUDENTS DOCUMENT LIFE ON FILM.(News)

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Daily News Byline: Rachel Uranga Staff Writer

SAN FERNANDO - A little inspiration and a video camera propelled Rosa Ruvalcaba to South America and into a world that once seemed far out of reach.

The 19-year-old college junior, recently back from a documentary filmmaking trip to Peru, is one of dozens of former and current students who have picked up a passion for film under the guiding hands of San Fernando High School teacher Marco Torres.

For five years, Torres has taught young filmmakers at his high school computer lab dubbed "the Community Inspiration Studio." And every summer, he assembles a small army of filmmakers, teachers and engineers to showcase their work.

On Saturday, Torres will feature more than 20 of their short films at the fifth annual iCan Film Festival, held at San Fernando's Library Plaza.

"I want kids to feel empowered in who they are," Torres said. "They have the capability of making the world a more powerful place."

Most of the films run three to five minutes and are personal stories from students and former students. They tell tales from the lives of those attending the 98 percent Latino high school, which has a 37 percent dropout rate.

Named with a nod to the Cannes Film Festival and to Apple's graphic-friendly "i-Mac" product line, the student-produced festival inspires teens to think beyond pen and paper and encourages many to become mentors for the next generation of filmmakers.

"This went from a hobby to a passion for me," said Ruvalcaba, a University of San Francisco student who returns every summer to help students edit films and organize the festival.

Earlier this year, she traveled to Peru to document one musical group's connection to its African roots. The band paid for the trip and financed the film after Ruvalcaba produced a video of the band performing in the San Fernando Valley.

Her documentary began in Torres' lab, where students who can't take a formal film class through the school district devote their Saturdays, after-school hours and lunch breaks to learn the craft.

Through film, students tell stories of the community and connect with its history, Torres said. He added that it gives them a creative break from the test-driven public school environment.

Giddy, serious and sometimes self-reflective, the students work in teams to create films about their inner thoughts, their lives and their dreams. Stories like "Abuelita," or

grandmother in Spanish, about one girl's struggle with depression. Or "Tocayo," which will be screened Saturday, follows one man's journey from Guatemala to San Fernando.

"Ham and Eggs" tells about another man's struggle to survive in America with three words of English. And "Tio" features one family's always humorous uncle.

The former students don't get any money for returning to the school to help. But there is a strong sense of community within the group. Take Ernesto Hernandez, one of Torres' former students.

At the age of 20, Hernandez left Occidental College to open up his own film and graphic design company which boasts clients from Apple Computer, Inc. to California State University, Northridge. He credits his career to the time he spent in Torres' classroom.

High school senior Elizabeth Ruvalcaba, Rosa's little sister, is one of the festival's lead organizers.

"This has built me up as a leader," Ruvalcaba said. "It's given me a way to talk in an eloquent way, to express myself."

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IF YOU GO

--"iCan 5 El Festival de Cine" will be held at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Library Plaza, 231 N. Maclay Ave., San Fernando. Admission is free.

CAPTION(S):

2 photos, box

Photo:

(1) San Fernando High School film teacher Marco Torres sits and views a student's project on a computer as others watch.

(2) Students Elizabeth Ruvalcaba, left, and Rachel Montesdeoca are organizers for the fifth iCan Film Festival, which showcases young filmmakers' work.

Michael Owen Baker/Staff Photographer

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IF YOU GO (see text)

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