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Reflection: Journey to Safety and Belonging: Honoring the Narratives of Asylees

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STRC Professional Development Fellowship Report
Maria J. Ferrera, 3/21/2024

Since I received the STRC Professional Development Fellowship, I have been given the time and space to learn the fundamentals in documentary filmmaking. In the summer of 2023, because many of the courses within DePaul's School of Cinematic Studies were already full, I took a class at [Chicago Filmmakers](#). There, I learned the foundations of digital filmmaking while working hands-on with a group of other filmmakers and creatives. I learned how to use the camera, basic concepts and practice in lighting, sound, editing, creating storyboards, and directing. This course gave me the skills to co-produce a short promotional film for a community organization which I co-founded and continue to work closely with -The Coalition for Immigrant Mental Health. This short film, entitled [Reimagining Mental Health Supports for New Arrivals](#) (link to film embedded) has allowed others to learn about the work its members are doing to provide mental health support in response to the over 30,000 new migrants who have settled in Chicago.

In the Fall of 2023, I was able to register for DePaul's School of Cinematic Arts course *Filming with Change Agents*, in which I learned a great deal from independent filmmaker and Professor Anu Rana, including the ethical dimensions of visual storytelling. This course was structured as a project-based service-learning course that had established relationships with community partners. One of the community partners was Illinois Community for Displaced Immigrants (ICDI). The students in this class were assigned to four different groups. Each group was to produce a short film (6-10 minutes in length) that would highlight the work and benefit the community organization. My group was assigned to ICDI. Collaborating with film students Fawad Amjad and Ashlynn O'Keane in this course, we produced a [short film](#) (link to film embedded) that highlights the remarkable work of ICDI and the rich narrative of an asylum seeker from Ecuador and her family. I learned so much from this process, working with a team of undergraduate students and playing the role of co-producer and co-director. It was such a challenging and demanding experience, and I learned so much. I developed interview questions for the family who we interviewed, and with the help of a language translator, engaged in an in-depth interview with an Ecuadorian mother who migrated with her nine children to flee persecution as part of an indigenous group. Developing a relationship with ICDI and this family to honor their stories was such a rich and powerful experience for me.

I hope to continue learning and building knowledge that will allow me to produce more documentary films that honor the stories of asylum seekers – why they flee their home and country of origin, the nature of their journeys to the US, what structures and conditions have caused them harm and allowed them to survive, thrive, and feel a sense of belonging. It is hoped that such films can lead to greater public awareness and practices (among immigration officers, attorneys, advocates, medical and mental health practitioners, etc.) that are socially just and trauma informed. As I write this report, I have developed a collaborative agreement with Filmmaker/DePaul Associate Professor Anu Rana and ICDI Deputy Director Johannes Favi to pursue funding to produce a documentary film series project that honors the stories of asylum seekers. Anu and I have recently submitted a grant application for a Provost's Collaborative Research grant, and we, together with community partner ICDI, plan to submit proposals for funding through DePaul's Migration Collaborative Solutions Lab and Urban Collaborative Community Research Initiative. We have also discussed pursuing other external sources of funding for our collaborative project. I am so grateful to the STRC for the generous support that has allowed me the time and space to jumpstart my interest in integrating film within my research and to pursue these projects.