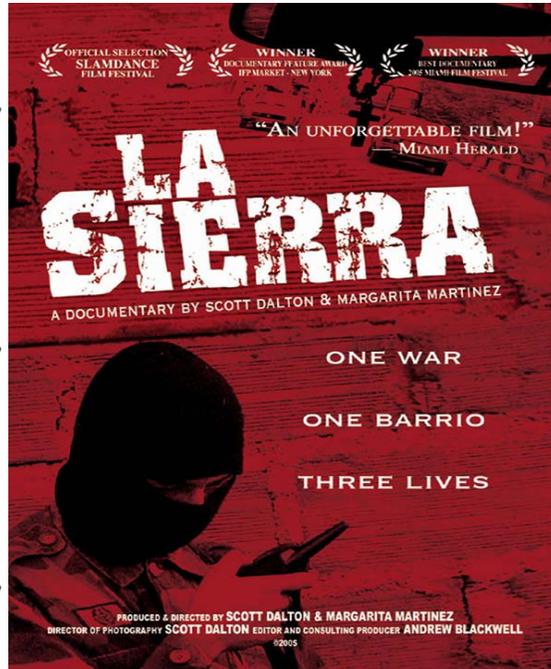


LA SIERRA

A Film by Scott Dalton & Margarita Martinez



“AN UNFORGETTABLE FILM!”

- Miami Herald

84 minutes – Color – Stereo – 2005 – Colombia/USA

FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS

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Synopsis 1

A searing exploration of three lives defined by violence, LA SIERRA traces a year in the life of a Medellin neighborhood ruled by a paramilitary gang. The film, which in production saw a lead participant killed and the filmmakers shot at by snipers, is an intimate, meditative exploration of violence, youth, and community that not only captures battles in progress, but also tells the story of families struggling to break the cycle of violence.

Synopsis 2

A searing portrayal of three young lives defined by violence, the award-winning documentary LA SIERRA traces a year in the life of a small Colombian neighbourhood ruled by paramilitary thugs. The film is an intimate, meditative exploration, revealing not only startling moments of violence and its aftermath, but also the tenderness and faith that enables a community to survive. *(see next page for long synopsis)*



Synopsis 3

More than 30,000 people have been killed over the last ten years in Colombia's bloody civil conflict, in which left-wing guerillas fight against the government and illegal right-wing paramilitary groups. Recently, as guerillas and paramilitaries sought to control marginal city neighborhoods, urban gangs aligned themselves with each side. In this way, the national conflict was translated into a brutal turf war that pitted adjacent barrios against each other. The documentary LA SIERRA explores life over the course of a year in one such barrio (LA SIERRA, in Medellin), through the prism of three young lives

Edison, aka "The Doll," is a paramilitary commander in LA SIERRA. At the age of 22, he is also the de facto mayor of the neighborhood and a playboy who has fathered six children by six different women. Openly dedicated to and excited by his life of violence, he is also an intelligent and charismatic young man. As we follow him through the armed conflict, its victories and setbacks, he shares his dreams for himself and his children, and explains his attachment to what he calls "my war." We follow his life up to the moment he is gunned down in the street, and then witness his family's suffering and faith in the face of tragedy.

Cielo, age 17, was displaced from the countryside in sixth grade, when her brother and father were murdered by guerillas. A mother at the age of 15, she was widowed when the father of her son (a gang member) was killed. Now Cielo is devoted to a new boyfriend, a paramilitary, who she visits in jail every Sunday. With little or no money to her name, Cielo goes downtown to beg and sell candies on the buses, resisting her friend's suggestion of prostitution. After her rocky relationship with her boyfriend unravels, Cielo finally gives in and takes a job in Medellin's red light district.

Jesus, 19, is a mid-level paramilitary member. Badly wounded when a homemade grenade blew up in his hands and face, Jesus presents himself as ready for death at any moment and hoping for little more than the opportunity to continue indulging his taste for marijuana and cocaine. But as the war in LA SIERRA comes to a end, and the paramilitaries begin a government-sponsored disarmament process, Jesus dreams of beginning a life without war.

LA SIERRA is an intimate, unflinching portrait of three lives defined by violence, and a community wracked by conflict. Over the course of a year these lives, and the life of the barrio itself, each undergo profound changes, experiencing victory, despair, defeat, death, love, and hope. In a place where journalists are seldom allowed, Scott Dalton and Margarita Martinez spent a year filming, interviewing, and building trust. The result is a frank portrayal that not only includes startling scenes of graphic violence and its aftermath, but also reveals intimate moments of love and tenderness, and shows the everyday life that manages to coexist with conflict.

Review Excerpts

*"This! stunning documentary embeds us in Medellin...
Reminiscent of 'City of God' — only real. Most striking of all the subjects is
Edison... his story alone, much like the others in
LA SIERRA, is one of devastating power."*

—Eli Kooris, Austin Chronicle

*"Two filmmakers have captured the tragic,
but human side of Colombia's paramilitary fighters."*

—New York Times

"Astonishing! Harrowing!"

—Ain't It Cool News

*"A singular entry into one of the world's oldest civil wars...
It's... ability to cut through the stereotypes...
makes LA SIERRA an unforgettable film."*

—Stephen Dudley, Miami Herald

"Astounding! Essential viewing!"

—Paul Isaacs, Toronto EYE

*"An astonishing level of fly-on-the-wall intimacy, and a
compelling portrait of individuals in a society ravaged by war."*

—Jaron Gilinsky, South Florida Sun-Sentinel

*"Riveting! It's a scream from a sierra in Colombia that
needs to not only be heard, but seen and felt."*

—Ralph De La Cruz, South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Awards and Festival Selections

Documentary Feature Award, IFP Market New York
Grand Jury Award, Best Documentary , Miami Int'l Film Festival
Honorable Mention, Best Documentary , Slamdance Film Festival
Hot Docs International Documentary Festival
SXSW Film Festival
Munich Documentary Film Festival
Big Sky Documentary Film Festival
Seattle International Film Festival
Human Rights Watch Int'l Film Festival
Newport Film Festival
AFI/Discovery Silver Docs Film Festival
Los Angeles Film Festival
Atlanta Film Festival
Jacksonville Film Festival
Revelations Perth Film Festival (Australia)

Filmmaker Biographies



Director/producer Scott Dalton, a native of Conroe, Texas, is a freelance photographer and filmmaker based in Colombia, where he has covered the conflict for five years. A nine-year veteran of Latin American photojournalism, he has worked extensively throughout Central and South America, as well as in the Middle East. In 2003, while on assignment in one of Colombia's most dangerous war zones, he was kidnapped by leftist rebels. (He was released after 11 days.) His work has appeared in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, Time magazine, Newsweek, and the Associated Press, among other outlets.



Director/producer Margarita Martinez is a reporter for the Associated Press in Bogota, Colombia, where she covers the civil conflict, gangs, and negotiations between the government and insurgent groups. She graduated from Bogota's University of the Andes in 1994 with a law degree and worked at the Foreign Affairs Ministry. She was a Fulbright Scholar in journalism and international affairs at Columbia University in New York, graduating in 1998. After a stint at NBC News, Martinez moved back to Colombia. Her work at the AP eventually led her to Medellin's poor barrios, which are a window on the roots of Colombia's violence.

Editor and consulting producer Andrew Blackwell is a Canadian-American documentary producer and editor living until recently in Bogota, Colombia. In addition to editing the award-winning ON THIS ISLAND (2001), which broadcast as part of the PBS Independent Lens series, he also edited UP TO THE MOUNTAIN, DOWN TO THE VILLAGE (2004), and was Associate Producer of IN SEARCH OF THE NOVEL (2000), an 8-hour series created by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. He also covered Afghanistan's recent elections for the US State Department, as a news editor and field audio engineer. His short film AUTORICKSHAW (2003) was presented at the 2004 New York Underground Film Festival. He lives in New Haven, Connecticut.

Interview with Filmmakers Scott Dalton and Margarita Martinez

Scott Dalton and Margarita Martinez are the team behind the award-winning documentary *La Sierra*. They have extensive experience as journalists, covering Colombia and Latin America for a wide range of international and regional news outlets. *La Sierra*, their first film, is an intimate, meditative exploration of violence, youth, and community. A small neighborhood in Medellín, Colombia, the barrio of *La Sierra* is ruled by a gang of young men, mostly teenagers, affiliated with Colombia's illegal paramilitary armies. Over the course of a year, the documentary unflinchingly follows the lives of three young people and their searing experiences of war, death, and love.

Why did you want to make this film?

We both knew the reality of neighborhoods like *La Sierra* through our work as journalists, Margarita as a writer for the Associated Press, and Scott as a photographer for AP, New York Times, and other newspapers. Margarita had been to *La Sierra*, and Scott thought it would be a compelling subject for a documentary, our first.

The aim of the film was to show the cycle of violence in Colombia, specifically among Colombia's urban youth. Remember, this is a decades-old conflict. From one generation to the next, marginalized youth get caught up in drugs and violence, all of which is ultimately connected to the wider national conflict. Because of the allure of gaining power and respect (often through fear) in their communities, thousands of Colombian youths take up arms.

And this world is actually very unexplored. More often than not, the stories that come out of Colombia only reflect the views of powerful leaders, whether in the government or in the various illegal groups waging war across the country. So this film was really an attempt to explore this forgotten or unseen side of the conflict. We were also very determined not to just show the violence, in isolation, the way you often hear about violence in the news, with no sense of who is involved and why, and what are the repercussions. Rather, we wanted to give a deeper, human context to it, the effects on families and communities when their young men decide to become warriors.

Was it hard to get access to this area, in light of the fact that it is controlled by paramilitaries?

Filming in La Sierra was only possible because we had explicit permission from high-level paramilitary commanders on the national scene. Once we had that permission, and the contacts that came with it, it made our work in the specific neighborhood of La Sierra much easier, because the higher-ups essentially told the local commanders that we were their guests.

Getting those original contacts with the national commanders, of course, was very difficult indeed, and was a product of years of working as journalists in Colombia. Margarita's connections with participants in the Colombian arena are second to none, ties and relationships that she has cultivated over years as a journalist. Without connections like that, it would be impossible to do what we did in La Sierra.

Was it dangerous?

Since we were basically the guests of the paramilitaries in the neighborhood of La Sierra, we didn't have anything to fear from them, although you could say many of them were very violent, dangerous people. Our problem in this respect was that there were insecure periods when the guys in the barrio would switch allegiance from one paramilitary group to another. They didn't know if their new bosses would approve of our presence and the work we had already done. They felt very insecure in that situation, and so did we.

The most obviously dangerous thing was following them when they were patrolling or fighting. At one point in the film Scott is following Jesus (one of the main participants in the documentary) as he patrols at night, and a sniper starts firing. Jesus is screaming, "Get down, gringo!" as everyone dives for cover. At other times during the production Scott accompanied paramilitaries engaged in intense combat. And as you also see in the film, stray bullets do kill people in La Sierra, so trying to document this kind of thing certainly has its dangers.

What was the most difficult part of making this film?

Coming to a place like La Sierra over such a long time did take a toll on us personally. You're worried that your welcome is going to wear thin (or that your luck is going to run out), and maybe you should quit with what you've already got. And of course, there were the problems all documentary filmmakers face, of building trust with people, of waiting for when they want

to open up and really talk, of being in the right place at the right time when things are happening in their lives.

In our case, it was particularly difficult to have built that personal connection, because the tragedy of the situation affects you more than if you just came for a day or two as a journalist. When one of the main participants in the film was killed during filming, we were devastated. This is someone who shared his life with us, helped us out, who became our friend. And then he is shot dead almost in front of our eyes. We didn't go back to La Sierra for a long time after that, and for a while we wanted to abandon the project completely. Of course, in a sense we had it easy. We had the luxury of always being able to leave La Sierra, whereas the people who participated in the documentary have to make their lives there.

What do you want to communicate with the film?

We want to show that the closer you get to a place like La Sierra, where young men are deeply involved in war and violence, the more you realize that it isn't so much about fighting for a cause as about getting ahead, about seizing power and prestige through violence, since it isn't available by normal, peaceful means.

This affects how you see the people in the film, specifically the young guys who are involved with paramilitary groups. Are these guys nothing more than murderers and thugs, or are they just young men following the only obvious path to respect and prestige? Audiences often identify with and even begin to care for Edison, a young man who is an admitted killer. This reflects the complexity we wanted to explore.

We also want the audience to wrestle with ideas of choice and responsibility. Although it is a film about violence, at a deeper level it is a meditation on personal choice. All of the people in the documentary address these issues, talking about they want to do with their lives, and whether or not they actually have the power to make those choices. They are in very difficult circumstances, with a powerful surrounding culture and history of violence pushing them in one direction. But they still feel, of course, that they have a role in where they're headed. That they have a chance to choose their destinies. Some of them take that chance, and some of them don't.

Credits and Production Information

Produced and Directed by

Scott Dalton
Margarita Martinez

Director of Photography

Scott Dalton

Editor and Consulting Producer

Andrew Blackwell

Special Thanks

Alvaro Correa	Juan Pablo Toro
David McIlvide	Paul Smith
Ricardo Correa	Alvaro Jimenez
Bryan Reichhardt	Ben de Soto
Ben and Jane Dalton	Sandra Lopez
Andrew Selsky	James Taft
Edward Hegstrom	Mathieu Mazza

The filmmakers dedicate LA SIERRA to the people of La Sierra. We wish to extend a very special thanks to the people of La Sierra for opening their homes sharing their lives.

Edisón Florez	Jazmín García Londoño
Jesús Martínez	Yurani Andrea Correa
Cielo Muñoz	Jesus Alberto Guerrero Díaz
Don Jairo Florez and Family	Don Javier
Geidy Alejandra Marín	

84 minutes / Color / Stereo / 4:3

Screening Formats: DVCAM, Beta SP (*other formats may be available, please inquire*)

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La Sierra Journal; Where Violence Reigns, Camera Has Compassion

By JUAN FORERO (Published: April 19, 2005)

To many in this class-conscious country, this hillside slum high over Medellín is known only as a violent outpost in Colombia's war, a place populated by gangsterlike paramilitary gunmen, soulless prostitutes and poor people with no hopes or dreams.

But on a recent sunny afternoon, amid the simple cinder-block homes and impossibly steep alleyways, the people of La Sierra could look in a mirror held up by two outsiders and see something different -- tragic, to be sure, but a bit more human.

On that day two filmmakers, an American and a Colombian who spent a year documenting the lives of La Sierra's paramilitaries, returned to show their film to a packed church. The two, Scott Dalton, a Texas-born photographer, and Margarita Martínez, a Colombian writer, had no idea how it would be received. The film contained raw scenes of combat and featured paramilitary fighters openly admitting to homicides.

But when the emotional 95 minutes ended, mothers and teenage girls wept, applause filled Santa María de La Sierra Church, and the young gunmen who were the protagonists nodded their heads in quiet approval.

"This shows our reality, not like most people think," said Byron Ríos, 22, a former paramilitary member who appears in the film. "It is like a soap opera of poor people. All the ones people ever see are of rich people."

One young former gunman, Jesús Martínez, 22, said, "I think even our dead comrades would have liked seeing it."

The film, "La Sierra," has won prizes at the Angelika Film Center in Manhattan and the Miami International Film Festival. It is to be shown this week at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival in Toronto, and next month at the Seattle International Film Festival. An 84-minute version is also scheduled for three screenings in June at the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center.

With no narration, the story is told by the film's subjects, who include a baby-faced commander named Edison Flórez and a 17-year-old girl, Cielo Muñoz. The scenes of young men preparing for combat and dodging gunfire are unflinching.

It was shot two years ago, at the height of combat in Medellín's slums between right-wing paramilitary gunmen and leftist guerrillas. The fighting here has since subsided, under a truce arranged while the film was being made. But the poverty and a fear of renewed violence remain.

During the war, the gunmen here worked for a right-wing group and were determined to kill off leftists entrenched in a neighboring barrio. But the film avoids dwelling on the political stakes, focusing rather on the intimate and ordinary lives of paramilitary fighters, their girlfriends and families. Those lives are shown to be mundane, bittersweet, even comic at times.

"We've covered massacres and so much crime committed by the paramilitaries that you see them as monsters," said Ms. Martínez, 35, a journalist. "But you're in their homes, seeing their lifestyle, the lack of opportunities, then you don't judge anymore."

In Colombia, of course, the right-wing paramilitary leaders for whom these young people fight are considered cocaine kingpins responsible for thousands of deaths. Top commanders live free from interference on sprawling ranches; since late last year, they too have been disarming -- in a deal with the government that human rights groups say will grant them virtual impunity.

The foot soldiers, in contrast, lead lives surrounded by poverty and come across more like Los Angeles street hoods, fighting for no ideological reason but simply because it is what young men in their barrio do.

In the film, Cielo Muñoz, a widow at 15, visits her new boyfriend in prison and sells candy from a bus. Jesús Martínez, who lost a hand when a homemade grenade exploded, says violence is "my destiny."

Viewers also meet Pirulu, a pint-sized boy who lugs ammunition for the fighters, and the hard-working, religious father of a leading paramilitary commander. A shopkeeper sums up the fighting, "The guys from there kill the guys from here because they're from here, and the guys from here kill the guys from there because they're from there."

The main character, Edison Flórez, 22, in one poignant scene, says he would have liked to be a civil engineer, winning the respect of neighbors who would refer to him as "doctor."

"The movie shows that people here can dream, that they can love, that they can feel, that they are like any other person," said Yasmín García, 18, who had a son with Mr. Flórez. "Just because they have guns doesn't mean they are just evil."

But tragedy is never far away.

In the midst of filming, government troops on patrol shot Mr. Flórez dead. Mr. Dalton's camera shows his lifeless body lying on the street.

Because of the painful footage, the filmmakers screened the film for Mr. Flórez's family first, showing it on a banged-up television in their home. The family, clutching each other, wailed in grief from the moment Mr. Flórez spoke to the camera.

His parents and siblings insisted on remembering him as a loving father who went by the nickname "the doll."

"I thought it would hit me hard, make me sick, but I was so happy to see him talking," said his mother, Lisidia Flórez, 46, wiping tears. "For us, he is still alive."

Hours later, the family joined 200 residents who crowded into La Sierra's airy church, watching the film on a big-screen television.

There were, to be sure, complaints. One former paramilitary fighter, Edwin Andrews Velásquez, 25, said the film "needed more action," explaining that the barrio was more violent than it had been portrayed.

But La Sierra is far different today from what it used to be. After the truce in 2003, the violence began to wane. But there is still widespread concern that former fighters, with little to do and few economic prospects, will descend into banditry.

That prompted the Rev. Jaime Bravo, the Catholic priest here, to say that he hoped the film would "show how this society is and hopefully touch the hearts of those in power so they do something about this."

"Our problem," he said, "is that poverty does not have a voice."

Photos: A still, left, from "La Sierra" showing Edison Flórez, a paramilitary who was later killed, and a girlfriend, Yasmín, caring for their child. His sisters, center above, consoled each other at the film's showing in the slum. (Photo by Paul Smith for The New York Times); (Photo by Scott Dalton)

Map of Colombia highlighting La Sierra: A film by outsiders documents the lives of La Sierra's paramilitaries.