

‘I haven’t seen my parents in years’: Miami film exposes pain of family separations

BY [MONIQUE O. MADAN](#)

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The documentary, dubbed “The Great Mother,” takes an inside look of how Sandigo has fostered the children with economic, legal and emotional support.
By [Jose Antonio Iglesias](#)

Eighteen-year-old Valerie Travi took a deep breath outside the Coral Gables Art Cinema Monday night.

With watery eyes, she prepared to enter the theater that was minutes away from displaying her most “intimate and vulnerable” moments, she said. For more than two years, a documentary film crew had shadowed her every step.

“My life will be an open book,” Travi told the Miami Herald. Seemingly nervous, the teen clenched her ticket.

“It’s for a good cause, though. The world will finally see what family separation looks like for kids born in America to undocumented parents.”

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The film, “The Great Mother,” which debuted Monday during the Miami Film Festival, profiles Homestead immigration activist [Nora Sandigo](#). Sandigo, the founder of the Nora Sandigo Foundation, is the legal guardian of [more than 2,000 U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrants](#).

Travi, along with her younger brother, Matthew, are two of those children.

The siblings were born in South Florida. Their parents entered the United States illegally in the 1990s after almost being shot to death in a raid in Colombia.

In 2015, the parents were deported after a routine traffic stop. They and their children — Travi was 13 and her brother a few years younger — moved back to Colombia.

Shortly thereafter, the parents faced extortion and threats: Pay \$100,000 for each American child “or they will pay,” Travi said.

In desperation, the mother and father found a social media post about Sandigo, gave her a call, and gave her guardianship over their children in Miami-Dade.

“In Colombia, American children are worth the world,” Travi said. “People die.”

Ten minutes before the show began, Travi and two dozen of her “brothers and sisters” posed for a photo.

“It’s amazing to see this from the children’s perspective,” Sandigo said. “We wanted to show the people what is happening, how the kids are suffering through family separation.”

The film takes an inside look at how Sandigo and her husband Reymundo [foster the children with economic, legal and emotional support](#). It starts off in 2015 when Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) were in the spotlight.

In 2012, former President Barack Obama signed the DACA order allowing about 700,000 children of illegal immigrants to stay in the United States if they were under 16 when they came to this country with their parents, among other conditions. In 2014, he signed an order creating the DAPA program, which protected some undocumented parents.

The film then covers the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president, and the resultant efforts by the Trump administration to crack down on illegal immigrants and strip away the Obama-era protections for certain undocumented immigrants and their children. The courts blocked Trump; the matter is now tied up in litigation.

“We tried so hard to make a non-partisan film about immigration that wasn’t political — that just shows people, not politics,” said director Dave LaMattina. “We did that with the hope that we can start getting people to see immigrants, non-documented folk in a new light, as people.”

Co-director Chad Walker chimed in: “Not as a tool for politicians to try to enrage their base.”

Walker continued: “In the movie, we try to focus on one family, to put a face to the issue. You know, to make people see that they’re one of many, of thousands. And if you can care about this family, you can care about this whole issue.”

Seventeen-year-old Ritibh Kumar, also featured in the film, watched it proudly from the first few rows. He told the Herald he hopes it impacts policy on a national level.

“I haven’t seen my parents in years —four years. They were deported to India,” he said. “I hope ‘The Great Mother’ changes that.”



Directors Dave LaMattina (right), and Chad Walker (left) pose with Nora Sandigo (center) at the screening of “The Great Mother” at the Coral Gables Art Cinema. Sandigo serves as the legal guardian for more than 1,000 U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrants. Jose A. Iglesias jiglesias@elnuevoherald.com



Miami, March 4, 2019 - Nora Sandigo (right) arrives for the screening of “The Great Mother” at the Coral Gables Art Cinema., accompanied by some of the children that she cares for. Nora Sandigo is the legal guardian of more than 1,000 U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrants. JOSE A. IGLESIAS JIGLESIAS@ELNUEVOHERALD.COM

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Monique O. Madan covers breaking news and immigration; she previously covered local government. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Boston Globe, The Boston Herald and The Dallas Morning News. She is currently a 2018-2019 Reveal Fellow at the Center for Investigative Reporting. Madan was on the award-winning team that earned first place for its 2018 breaking news coverage of the bridge collapse at Florida International University. She graduated from Miami Dade College and Emerson College in Boston.