



# ÁGUILAS



A FILM BY KRISTY GUEVARA-FLANAGAN & MAITE ZUBIAURRE

## SYNOPSIS

Along the scorching southern desert border in Arizona, it is estimated that only one out of every five missing migrants are ever found. *ÁGUILAS* is the story of one group of searchers, the *Aguilas del Desierto*, themselves largely immigrant Latinos. Once a month these volunteers—construction workers, gardeners, domestic laborers by trade—set out to recover missing loved ones referred to them by word of mouth, phone calls, or Facebook message. Amidst rising political repression and cartel violence, as well as the eternal difficulties of travel in the Sonoran Desert, the *Aguilas* carry out their solemn task.

*ÁGUILAS* lays bare the tragic reality of migrant death by venturing deep into the wilderness of the borderlands. The desert is a vast cemetery where the bodies and dried bones of migrants lie exposed under the scorching sun. In a world where efforts to humanize the migrant experience often get lost within the statistics and headlines, this documentary provides an observational and poetic response to one of the most pressing issues of our time, undocumented immigration and the hardships of the border crossing experience.

USA | 2020 | Color | 14 mins | 1.85:1 | DCP | Spanish/English





“Águilas is a film that most poignantly displays the need immigrants feel to come to America — even at the cost of starvation and death. Failed attempts are presented by a backpack, a sweater, and scattered bones. How desperate the dream is of a perfect landing that ends so tragically.”

SXSW 2021

“This short yet heartbreaking documentary is bookmarked by audio recordings of desperate family members pleading for help over gorgeous footage of the desert, dovetailing the two opposing themes of the film—the hope and fear that come with crossing the border for a better life.”

Full Frame Film Fest 2021

“Powerfully encapsulates a complex and ongoing crisis on the U.S./Mexico border, intimately capturing the intrepid work of volunteers, the haunting use of migrant families’ audio messages, and the harsh beauty of the desert. ÁGUILAS quietly but effectively calls out the utter absence of government in their endeavor.”

Big Sky Doc Fest 2021

“We were impressed by the storytelling of this verité short which establishes the process of a haunting, necessary, and difficult repetitive task with deep feeling and respect. The depiction, collection, and processing of human remains is one of the urgent ethical issues of contemporary art and documentary film. This film approaches the subject and its hauntings with intimacy without voyeurism insisting on the documentary form’s capacity for healing and restitution.”

Nashville Film Festival 2021

“While we hear stories of immigrants coming to our borders, very rarely do you hear about the people who don't make it and disappear entirely. A simple and effective story about those who get lost on the way and those who make it their mission to look for them. It is good to see that there is a dedicated group of people who are able to help the dead rest with a sense of justice and peace.”

El Paso Film Festival 2021

“It was the short film that felt most like a feature to me. In other words, it had a story arc that made me feel like I'd just eaten a complete meal. (And yet, I would have happily eaten more.) It had stakes. I felt invested. My heart went out to these heroes doing something so miserable and so necessary. To sum up: It was an epic doc short.”

Charlotte Film Festival 2021

**JURY STATEMENTS**



# DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

My scholarly work on border art, migration, and forensics led me to *Aguilas del Desierto* and their heroic humanitarian mission. The *Aguilas* are Latino immigrants of humble means who at least once a month travel in their “trocas” [pickup trucks] from San Diego, CA, to the Arizonan desert, and search on foot for the remains of missing migrants. I joined *Aguilas del Desierto* three years ago, and have since then had the privilege to witness how their selfless devotion brings peace of mind to grieving families in Mexico and Central America. The desert is a vast cemetery where the fresh bodies and dried bones of migrants lie exposed under the scorching sun. By venturing deep into the wilderness of the borderlands and searching for the remains of missing migrants, *Aguilas del Desierto* lay bare the tragic reality of migrant death. And it is the enormity and injustice of this widespread though barely acknowledged tragedy along the border that compelled me to go beyond scholarly writing: In search for a more efficient tool able to raise awareness about migrant death and also highlight the heroic humanitarian work of *Aguilas del Desierto*, I approached Kristy, my colleague at UCLA, and that is how our documentary came about.

—MAITE ZUBIAURRE

When Maite first described her work with the *Aguilas del Desierto* I was immediately captured by the Sisyphean nature of the group against the enormity of the border crisis. Who are these people so committed to such thankless work? I gathered a small crew and set out with Maite to join them just a few days before Christmas. We met the *Aguilas* pre-dawn at a lonesome gas station in the small town of Gila Bend. After driving all night from their homes in Southern California and sleeping in their cars, the *Aguilas* welcomed us to the group and discussed their routes for the day.

As we headed toward our search destination, our caravan grew: Mexican and Dutch journalists arrived to walk with the organization; college-student volunteers that have heard about them from their Facebook page joined; a canine rescue unit just coming back from fire sweeps in Northern California accompanied for the first time. The *Aguilas*, accepting of young and old, veterans and newbies, cannot keep up with the requests for missing migrants.

We ended up filming two searches, one in a temperate November and the other in a lethally hot July. Each time the pace is rigorous. The desert appears flat, but cholla, rocks and surprisingly wide ant hills, make for difficult terrain. It is hard to keep up and as a film crew, we lost each other many times, camera and sound completely out of sync. At the end of each day, we gathered together and made camp. We ventured into the desert again the next morning to squeeze in a few more search hours before everyone heads back home, many to work early Monday morning. As arduous as it all is, the *Aguilas* remain focused on the travails of the migrants themselves, hopeful to reunite families to their lost ones.

—KRISTY GUEVARA-FLANAGAN



# DIRECTOR'S BIOS

**KRISTY GUEVARA-FLANAGAN (Director)** is an Associate Professor at UCLA's School of Theatre, Film, and Television, where she heads the MFA Directing Documentary concentration. She has been making documentary films that focus on gender, death, and the Latinx community for nearly two decades. Guevara-Flanagan's documentary and experimental films have screened at the Sundance, Tribeca, SXSW, and HotDocs film festivals and the Getty Museum. Her work has broadcast on PBS and the Sundance Channel, received numerous awards, and been funded by ITVS, the Sundance Institute, Fork Films, the IDA, the Tribeca Institute, Latino Public Broadcasting, and California Humanities. Her films are currently in distribution with Women Make Movies.

**MAITE ZUBIAURRE (Co-Director)** has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Columbia University, New York. She is a professor of European Languages and Transcultural Studies, Spanish and Portuguese, Digital Humanities, and Urban Humanities at UCLA. Before joining UCLA, Zubiaurre taught at USC, UNAM (Mexico), ITAM (México), and UT, Austin. She is the author of numerous publications, the most recent one, an award-winning monograph on the cultural representations of contemporary refuse (*Talking Trash. Cultural Uses of Waste*, 2019). She is presently leading a collaborative project on migrant death and border activism and art that includes a scholarly monograph and a digital map. "Filomena Cruz" is Maite Zubiaurre's alter ego as a visual artist and activist.





# CREW BIOS

## EDITOR

NICO SANDI is a filmmaker and freelance editor from Cochabamba, Bolivia. He has worked on projects about the death penalty in Nebraska, migration in Nogales, Mexico, climate change in Bethel, Alaska, cultural miscegenation in the Bolivian Amazon, and educational opportunities for a refugee family in the Bronx. His most recent film, *Everywhere, Nothing Is Hidden*, looks at the daily activities inside a home for people with intellectual disabilities. He holds an M.F.A. in Documentary Film and Video from Stanford University and a B.A. in Anthropology, Sociology and Journalism from Creighton University.

## CINEMATOGRAPHER

DAVID MARQUEZ is a Mexican cinematographer and freelance color corrector. He received his Bachelor's degree from the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. He is best known for his work in film experimenting with multiple exposures and has photographed numerous commercial, fiction, and documentary projects for the production company 6 pm Films, among others. His work has been featured in the Short Film Corner of the Cannes Film Festival and the Morelia Film Festival. He is the recent winner of the Eco Film Festival in Mexico City for his documentary *Con el Tiempo*. He currently lives in Los Angeles and is pursuing an M.F.A. in the Cinematography program at UCLA.



# SCREENINGS AND AWARDS

Big Sky Documentary Film Festival - Virtual/Missoula, MT (February 2021)

**World Premiere, Best Mini-Doc Jury Award**

SXSW Film Festival - Virtual/Austin, TX (March 2021)

**Best Short Documentary Jury Award**

Selected for Publication with the New Yorker Documentary Series (April 2021)

Mountain Film Festival - Virtual/Telluride, CO (May 2021)

Full Frame Documentary Film Festival - Virtual/Durham, NC (June 2021)

Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival - Los Angeles, CA (June 2021)

**Best Live Action Short Jury Award**

San Francisco Doc Fest SF Indie - Virtual/San Francisco, CA (June 2021)

AFI Docs - Virtual/Washington, DC (June 2021)

Sedona International Film Festival - Virtual/Sedona, AZ (June 2021)

Palm Springs International Shortfest - Virtual/Palm Springs, CA (June 2021)

San Antonio CineFestival - San Antonio, TX (July 2021)

**Best US Documentary Short Jury Award**

Walla Walla Movie Crush Festival - Walla Walla, WA (July 2021)

Indy Shorts International Film Fest - Indianapolis, IN (July 2021)

Sonoma International Film Festival Summerfest - Sonoma, CA (August 2021)

Phoenix Film Festival - Virtual/Phoenix, AZ (August 2021)

Nevada City Film Festival - Virtual/Nevada City, CA (August 2021)

New York Latino Film Festival - New York, NY (September 2021)

Woodstock Film Festival - Woodstock, NY (September - October 2021)

Nashville Film Festival - Nashville, Tennessee (October 2021)

Seattle Latino Film Festival - Seattle, WA (October 2021)

El Paso Film Festival - Virtual/El Paso, TX (October 2021)

Cinequest Virtual Festival - Virtual/San Jose, CA (November 2021)

24 Fps International Film Festival - Abilene, TX (November 2021)

Cucalorus, Wilmington, NC (November 2021)

DOC NYC, New York City, NY, Short List (November 2021)

Borders No Borders Film Festival, Houston, TX (November 2021)

Kendal Mountain Festival, Kendal, Cumbria, UK (November 2021)

Official Latino Film and Arts Festival - Virtual (November 2021)

Buenos Aires International Documentary Film Festival - Virtual (December 2021)

# EDUCATIONAL SCREENINGS

UCLA School of Theatre, Film, and Television FTV 403C/186C, Virtual screening and panel - Virtual/Los Angeles, CA (March 2021)

The UANL, through its Secretariat of Extension and Culture, and the University of California in Los Angeles, through its Center for Mexican Studies,  
“Monterrey-Los Angeles: Migrant Cities”, Virtual screening and panel - Virtual/Los Angeles, CA (April 2021)

UCLA Center for the Study of International Migration Virtual screening and panel - Virtual/Los Angeles, CA ( April 2021)

Solidarity film program organized by the NGO Galicia Solidaria at Sala Numax in Santiago de Compostela - Virtual/Spain (June 2021)

University Film and Video Association Conference (UFVA) - Virtual screening and panel, **Best Documentary Short Award** Virtual/Chicago, IL (July 2021)

The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) - Virtual screening and panel - Virtual (July 2021)

# CREDITS

KRISTY GUEVARA-FLANAGAN director, producer, writer  
MAITE ZUBIAURRE co-director, producer, writer  
NICO SANDI writer, editor  
DAVID MARQUEZ cinematographer  
PRISCILLA GONZALEZ SAINZ additional editing  
CECILIA ALBERTINI  
JOSH BEDDINGFIELD sound  
ROBERT ARNOLD color correction  
DAN OLMSTEAD sound mixer

&

AGUILAS DEL DESIERTO  
ELY ORTIZ, PRESIDENT  
GERARDO CAMPOS, VICE PRESIDENT  
MARICELA ORTIZ  
VINCENTE RODRIGUEZ  
AND ALL OF THE VOLUNTEERS

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