

DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW

Inocente. Directed by Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine, Yael Melamede, Producer, 39 min.

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Inocente, a documentary directed by Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine, tells the story of Inocente Izúcar, a 15-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has lived homeless in San Diego, California, for over a decade. Inocente's story is not unheard of in what is known as "America's finest city," where affordable housing is almost non-existent and the percentage of people living below the poverty line has grown from 11 percent in 2007 to 15 percent in 2011, according to the Center on Policy Initiatives, a progressive think-tank in the area.

The documentary, which was first aired on MTV, and has recently won an Oscar, follows Inocente from one of her family's temporary homes to a school for homeless kids, where she is sponsored by the program *A Reason To Survive*, ARTS. There she creates very colorful paintings and paints over her own face with vivid colors. In the documentary, it is also possible to see Inocente's mother, an immigrant from Mexico who became homeless when she denounced her abusive husband who had taken Inocente and her older brother against their will across the border to the United States. Authorities subsequently deported her mother to Mexico.

The documentary is an uplifting story about a very talented immigrant girl, who the creators have said would give them the opportunity to paint a picture of homelessness in the United States, since there are about 1.7 million homeless children in the country. Yet, it seems that they neither expected nor were prepared to tell the nuanced story of undocumented immigrants and the structural inequality that makes their lives marginal, such as the lives of Inocente's family, including her mother and two younger brothers. For example, in San Diego County a recent housing boom left behind an array of Mac Mansions, while the immigrant workers who built those homes, mowed the lawns, and have worked as maids for some of their inhabitants, have lived in cramped housing in less desirable neighborhoods, or have had to live in canyons using makeshift homes because even shared living quarters are unaffordable to them.

Inocente's story is told using a Horatio Alger myth framework, where profound inequality is viewed through the lens of personal responsibility, and not through the unequal social structures and relationships in human communities. Although

they use Inocente's story to generate empathy from the audience and awareness about homeless children, it is important to go beyond the documentary in order to paint a complete and accurate picture of the issue. The contrasting stories of Inocente and her family, for example, are worrisome.

It is painful to watch a scene where one art director from Inocente's academy brings a lawyer to convince Inocente's mother to allow her to live in Toussaint Academy, a place for young artists, in order to relieve the tensions between them. The mother does not entirely understand her daughter's quest to become an artist. There is no formal translation at the meeting, and the mother's defeat, humiliation, and fear can be seen on the screen when she talks in a very low voice to the art director and the lawyer after receiving them in a garage that serves her as a precarious temporary home. It is possible to see the shame she feels from her inability to provide her children with a dignified place to live (in spite of working multiple jobs), and at the end of the conversation she agrees to let Inocente leave, and wishes her good luck. The documentary also mentions the array of shelters that have been temporary homes for Inocente's family in San Diego. The viewer is left to wonder why nobody has been able to offer them a more permanent option during over a decade of homelessness, and why they have so frequently needed to shift from shelter to shelter.

Inocente undoubtedly fits the American mainstream audience's tastes for the individual success story. Yet, while it calls attention to an overall problem, it does so in a way that obscures the underlying social complexity. Although the documentary website will take you to a brief discussion about undocumented children and the Dream Act, the larger social and policy issues are minimized. Paradoxically, the individual story of Inocente is the film's greatest strength, since it is directed to a more mainstream public, and narrated to appeal to the tastes of a wider audience. This documentary can be useful to start a more directed conversation about the structural causes of homelessness and the legal and economic causes of immigration. It is also necessary to understand the marginalization that undocumented immigration status can bring not only to a person, but to entire families and communities where working people just scrape by in the margins of an apparently prosperous society.