



A Film by Catherine Murphy

“This is not just a story about literacy.  
This story is about hopes and dreams.  
It is about youth empowerment and  
women's empowerment and  
what is possible.”

-Director Catherine Murphy



## SYNOPSIS

**Cuba, 1961:** 250,000 volunteers taught 700,000 people to read and write in one year. 100,000 of the teachers were under 18 years old. Over half were women.

**MAESTRA** is a 33-minute documentary that explores the experience of nine women who, as young girls, taught on the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961. Through current day interviews from in their homes in Havana, archival film footage and still photos, we look at this moment and how it changed their lives as women.

Our characters are Daysi Veitia, Gina Rey, Norma Guillard, Eloisa Hernandez, Adria & Ivonne Santana, Blanca Monett, Diana Balboa and Griselda Aguilera. We also meet Tina Gomez and her two sons, who live in the Sierra Maestra mountain range of Cuba, and housed a literacy volunteer in their home.

The film begins with archival footage from the UN General Assembly in September 1960, when Cuba announced that they would eradicate illiteracy in one year. They made an open call for volunteer teachers, with a massive media campaign that went all over the country. Over 250,000 Cuban citizens volunteered - 100,000 of the volunteers were under 18 and over half of were women. Interviews, recorded testimonials, and powerful archival footage that took years to compile, tell this story that personifies the hopes and dreams of a nation and the will and courage of the young women who made this monumental endeavor possible.

Cuba of the 1950s was dominated by a staunchly patriarchal family structure. Most of the young women's families refused to let them go to the mountainous regions in a time of such uncertainty. So they entered into an intense process of negotiation with their families, fighting for a degree of autonomy and independence that had rarely been allowed for Cuban women before then. It was a teenage girl uprising.

They went for two-week teacher training at Varadero, a beach town on the northern coast of Cuba, and then off to mountains and valleys across the island to their teaching assignments. They lived with the families who they would teach, working alongside them in the fields during the daytime & teaching classes (often by kerosene lantern) on nights and weekends.

The young teachers faced many challenges & difficulties. There were women whose husbands forbade them to study, elderly farmers who could not hold a pencil, and the daily challenges of rural life. There were also very real dangers. In the midst of the Literacy Campaign, the Bay of Pigs was invaded. Although the invasion did not succeed, armed confrontations continued across Cuba. In the Escambray Mountains, six months after the Bay of Pigs invasion, one young literacy teacher was killed along with the *campesino* Pedro Lantigua, that he was teaching to read and write.

In spite of the growing dangers, the majority of young teachers refused to leave, and stayed on in the communities where they were teaching, finishing out the year-long campaign. Their eyes sparkle as they share beautiful, moving – and sometimes funny - stories of teaching their students to write the alphabet, to sign their names, or to spell the name of their country, Cuba.

The story ends with the protagonists talking about how this experience changed their lives and their sense of themselves. They speak profoundly about how it changed the way they saw themselves as women, their notions about what they could strive for in life. And all of them insist this was the most important thing they have ever done.

Source: [www.maestrafilm.org/](http://www.maestrafilm.org/)



## BIOGRAPHIES

### **NORMA GUILLARD** *15 years old in 1961*



A social psychologist from Santiago de Cuba, Guillard was one of the first Cuban women of her generation to call herself a Feminist, and today primarily works on issues of gender, race, sexual orientation and the importance of diversity in a Cuban/Caribbean context. An Afro-Cuban woman, Guillard has contributed much to the lively debates on race and racism in Cuba. An adjunct professor at the University of Havana teaching psychology and gender, and past president of the Cuban Association of Psychologists, she is also an advisor to United Nations Development Program and UNESCO on gender and HIV/AIDS prevention. She is a principal collaborator at the National Center for the AIDS Prevention and the National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX), which spearheads work to educate against homophobia and lobby for civil unions in Cuba. She is an avid speaker at conferences, educational, social and cultural forums worldwide.

### **CATHERINE MURPHY** *director, producer*



Catherine Murphy is a San Francisco-based filmmaker who has spent much of the last twenty years working in Latin America. Murphy lived and worked in Cuba in the 1990's, earning a Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Havana. Currently, Murphy is an adjunct professor at NYU's Center for Global Affairs and founder/director of The Literacy Project. As an independent film professional, Murphy's work has largely focused on social documentaries as a producer, translator, subtitle supervisor and associate producer. Most recently, she was advisor to the Cuba Residency for Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. In 2006, Murphy served as senior producer at the TeleSur TV Washington DC Bureau, and has produced content for Pacifica Radio National, TeleSur TV, Avila TV and WBAI. In 2009, while working and living in Caracas, Murphy founded *Tres Musas Producciones*, a collaborative production house of independent women producers working together in film, music and literature.

Source: [www.maestrathefilm.org/](http://www.maestrathefilm.org/)



## Discussion Questions

*"It was great fun because there's a moment when the person discovers they can read!*

*They can't really tell little by little. Then comes the joy:*

*I can read! I can read!"*

- What was the Cuban Literacy Campaign? What impacts did it have for Cuba? What is the education system in Cuba like today?
- The women in the film spoke of the incredibly transformative power of their experience. One said, "For me, it was decisive. After the Campaign, I realized that I could aim higher in life. I didn't have to settle for the future my mom planned for me. I could aspire to be more." Explain what her words meant. What was the role of women (particularly young women) in Cuba at the time? How was the Literacy Campaign liberating for young women?
- What role does race play in the film? How does that compare/contrast with your understandings and/or research of Cuba? What about literacy and race in the United States?
- Think about the concept of literacy. Why is it important for an individual? Why is it important for a society?
- Think about the young *maestras* in the film. Some may have been your age or even younger than you! Can you imagine undertaking that type of position? What were some of the challenges they faced? How did they grow from those challenges?
- What do the terms rural and urban mean? What is their significance in the film?
- What is a revolution? How was the term applied in the film (keep in mind there can be more than one use of the term)?
- Why were some parents in the film resistant to their children's intentions to join the Literacy Campaign? What were the historical and political contexts? What do you think your parents would have said?
- "The Literacy Campaign was in 1961, the revolution in 1959. We had to break many, many ties with the previous society. It was a huge task." What did the *maestra* mean when she said this? How did the Cuban Revolution change the country?
- What are oral histories? Why are they important? Can you give any other examples of oral histories?
- What do you feel you have to contribute to the world around you?
- How is this story from Cuba 50 years ago relevant to my life in the United States today?



## Discussion Questions

- “They signed with a cross or with a fingerprint—a thumbprint. That was very embarrassing for them, especially since I was just a young girl who was going to be their teacher. But this changed because they were very proud to have their own teacher. So that feeling of being ashamed transformed into excitement and discovery about how to write things.” What responses does this quotation evoke in you?
- The women in the film said that they became part of their student’s families. How was that true? Why do you think that happened? Have you ever formed relationships like this outside of your “traditional” family?
- What was the role of trust among the teachers and students? How did you see that explored in the film? Try to give specific examples.
- Think about some of the scenes of rural Cuba presented in the film. What did you notice about the daily workload (activities instead maybe) of the people? Some of the workers were harvesting sugar cane. Research sugar production in Cuba, keeping in mind the institution of slavery and its legacy.
  - What did you learn about sugar production and the Cuban people?
  - What were some of the cultural, political, and economic issues you discovered?
  - How could you relate one or some of these issues to the film?
- YOU are a part of the United States education system. What are some of the debates about education here? Do some research on both the Cuban and U.S. education systems. How do the two compare? How do they differ?

- **Key Terms**

Revolution

Sexism

*Brigadista*

Rural

Urban

Insurgent

Bay of Pigs

Fidel Castro

Communist Party

Literacy

Sugar Cane

Gender

*Machismo*

Taboo



## Director's Statement– Catherine Murphy

My grandmother and great-aunt were raised in the Cuban province of Camaguey at the turn of the 20th Century. Daughters of North American parents living in Cuba, they spoke Spanish like Cubans. I grew up very close to them, and was raised on their stories of Cuba, passing on to me a love for the beautiful island, its traditions, language and people.

I found my way to Cuba twenty years later, earned a Masters Degree, and lived and worked there for many years to follow. I was in Cuba on September 11, 2001 and remember the deep sorrow and fear shared by the world. I was worried for the world. In searching for models of hope, I was struck by an incredible story that touched me in Cuba – a story of hope that I wanted to share.

I heard some murmurings over the years at a friend's home in Havana. His mother, Daysi Veitia, then in her early 60s, had been part of a singularly historical social phenomenon in Cuba. As a teenager in 1961, she volunteered to teach reading and writing in the Eastern mountains of Cuba. As I delved into her story, I found that several women I knew from that generation had been part of the campaign. In 1961, 250,000 people volunteer teachers set out to teach their nation to read, as part of the most ambitious literacy campaign in history. Half of them were teenagers and over half were women. Cuba became the first country to eradicate illiteracy and young people were at the heart of this enormous feat.

Inspired by these stories, I had to record them. In 2004, on my last day in Cuba, with a cinematographer, sound engineer, homemade boom and my own Panasonic DVX100, we did three interviews in the homes of former volunteer teachers. Two weeks later, I started to edit. I fell in love with their stories and knew this was a much bigger project. From 2004 to 2010, we interviewed more than 50 volunteer teachers from the Literacy Campaign and some of the families they taught to read and write. The first three interviews that we recorded made the final cut, along with six other extraordinary women and one of the families they lived with. The archival footage and stills were collected over five years of exhaustive research in Cuban and US archives. We sought out the living photographers from that era. One of them, Liborio Noval, photographed the closing march of the campaign, and shot the beautiful image of the sea of pencils and shining faces.

This is not just a story about literacy. This story is about hopes and dreams. It is about youth empowerment and women's empowerment and about what is possible. It about young people who threw themselves into the seemingly impossible, and helped build a new society at the age of 17. The women we interviewed have diverse opinions today, and many have made great achievements, but every one of them insists that this was the most important thing they have ever done.

MAESTRA is a living project. We continue to research and interview teachers and students, gathering more testimonies. We continue to search for archival materials and sources. Through our mother organization, The Literacy Project ([www.literacyproject.org](http://www.literacyproject.org)), we will use MAESTRA as a tool for inspiration and social change and to collaborate with communities where illiteracy is an ongoing problem.

My commitment is to make this film available to schools, teachers, and literacy organizations worldwide.

But my greatest hope is that this documentary will move people – especially young people - to realize they can do great things – to even change the course of history.



**Vanderbilt's Center for Latin American Studies**

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/clas/>

Vanderbilt's Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) is designated a Comprehensive National Resource Center on Latin America by the U.S. Department of Education. While maintaining one of the strongest concentrations of Brazilianists of any university in the United States, the Center's renowned faculty also has particular strengths in Mesoamerican anthropology and archaeology, the study of democracy building and economic development, Latin American literature and languages, and African populations in Latin America and the Caribbean. CLAS actively seeks to expand knowledge on the subject of Latin America in K-12 settings by offering teacher workshops and institutes and designing teacher resource materials.

**The Literacy Project**

<http://www.theliteracyproject.org/english/about.html>

The Literacy Project is an oral history & research project that began collecting personal testimonies about literacy in 2004. They believe that literacy is a fundamental social justice and human rights issue, essential for a healthy and dignified society and a fully functioning democracy. Through a variety of media and documentation methodologies, the project is creating an archive of personal stories related to literacy - stories from men and women who have taught literacy to others, worked to implement literacy programs, or struggled to achieve literacy themselves.

They are also exploring the history of literacy campaigns and literacy programs throughout the Americas. They are especially concerned with the intersection of race, class and gender as it relates to literacy: who is literate and who is not, and how literacy can be brought to all.





