

“LA SIERRA”

DOCUMENTARY EXPLORES PARAMILITARY LIVES IN MEDELLIN

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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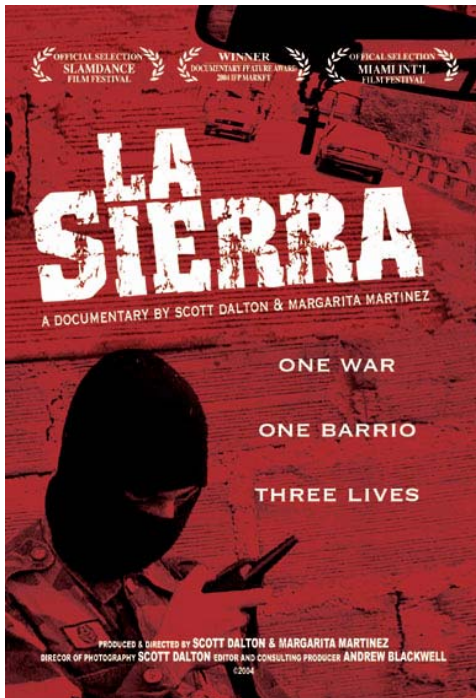
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Filmmakers Scott Dalton and Margarita Martinez are pleased to introduce their film **LA SIERRA**, a searing exploration of three young lives in the small Medellin neighborhood of La Sierra, which is ruled by paramilitary thugs.

The film, which won the Grand Jury Prize for best documentary at the 2005 Miami International Film Festival, also won the Documentary Feature Award at the 2004 IFP Market in New York (fine cut), and received the Honorable Mention in the documentary competition at the 2005 Slamdance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. *La Sierra* is also an official selection at the 2005 South by Southwest Film Festival and the 2005 HOT DOCS International Documentary Festival.

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

LA SIERRA, which in production saw a lead participant murdered and the filmmakers shot at by snipers, is an intimate, meditative exploration of violence, youth, and community. A small neighborhood in Medellin, Colombia, La Sierra is ruled by a group of young men, mostly teenagers, affiliated with Colombia's illegal paramilitary armies. Over the course of a year, the documentary follows the lives of three young people (two of them paramilitaries themselves) and their experiences of war, death, and love.



LA SIERRA: EXTENDED SYNOPSIS

(Reveals major story developments)

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.

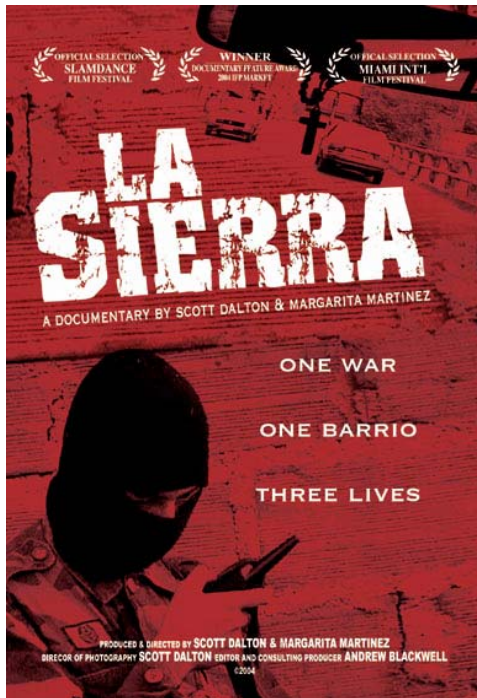
LA SIERRA is an intimate, unflinching portrait of three lives defined by violence, and a community wracked by conflict. Over the course of a year these lives, and the life of the barrio itself, each undergo profound changes, experiencing victory, despair, defeat, death, love, and hope. In a place where 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.

PRODUCTION DETAILS:

Shooting format: DVCam - NTSC
Length: 84 min
Color/BW: Color
Audio: Stereo
Aspect ratio: 3:4
Screening format: DVCAM, BETA SP

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Dodging Bullets and Building Trust:

a conversation with the filmmakers of LA SIERRA

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 Medellin, 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.

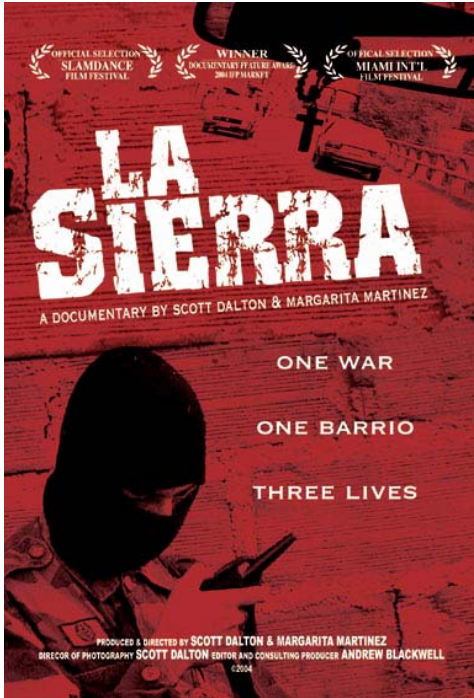
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LA SIERRA:

KEY PERSONNEL & CREDITS

DIRECTOR/PRODUCER SCOTT DALTON

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

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

Andrew Blackwell is a Canadian-American documentary producer and editor living in Connecticut. 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 an editor and field audio engineer. His short film AUTORICKSHAW (2003) was presented at the 2004 New York Underground Film Festival. He spent 2004 in Bogotá, Colombia, where he edited LA SIERRA.

LA SIERRA

A film by Scott Dalton & Margarita Martinez

This film is dedicated 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
Jesús Martínez
Cielo Muñoz

don Jairo Florez and Family
Geidy Alejandra Marín
Jazmín García Londoño
Yurani Andrea Correa
Jesus Alberto Guerrero Díaz
don Javier

Produced and Directed by
Scott Dalton
Margarita Martinez

Director of Photography
Scott Dalton

Editor and Consulting Producer
Andrew Blackwell

Special Thanks:

Alvaro Correa
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Ben and Jane Dalton
Edward Hegstrom
Alvaro Jimenez
Sandra Lopez
Mathieu Mazza

David McIlvide
Bryan Reichhardt
Andrew Selsky
Paul Smith
Ben de Soto
James Taft
Juan Pablo Toro

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Margarita Martinez
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Edison, a young paramilitary commander, loads a pistol while his girlfriend Jazmin, 16, nurses their baby.

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Cielo, 17, visits the grave of her husband. She was left widowed with a baby at age 15.

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