

EQUITY + REPRESENTATION



THE TRAGEDY OF BEING RELEVANT

BY CAREEN SHANNON

Making a film that draws attention to a major issue in the news is very gratifying. In the case of *Las Abogadas: Attorneys on the Front Lines of the Migrant Crisis*, it is also tragic. Let me explain.



I had the honor of serving as Executive Producer of a film that highlights issues I had worked on for 30 years as an immigration lawyer and law professor. Director Victoria Bruce and Producer Laura Seltzer-Duny spent more than two years documenting the work of four women attorneys who worked tirelessly, and for little or no compensation, defending the rights of migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The film crew on-site in Tapachula, a Mexican town located on the border of Guatemala.

These brave humanitarians used every legal tool at their disposal to save the

lives of desperate migrants who had escaped from unimaginable harms they had suffered in their home countries. Most of the film's story took place during the Trump administration, but things did not get much better under Biden and so the lawyers' work continued unabated. The film is thus a snapshot in time, from the end of the Trump administration through the first year of the Biden administration. But the issues raised are, heartbreakingly, eternal.



Our featured attorneys were an interestingly diverse group of women — and for some, it was their own or their family’s immigrant experience that motivated them to pursue this work. For example, Charlene D’Cruz left India as a teenager to attend college in the U.S. and found she faced intense discrimination as a woman and as an immigrant, something that continues to this day. Rebecca Eichler, a first-generation American of Chinese and German descent, left the United States with her husband and children after Trump was elected, and lives in central Mexico. Mulu Alemayehu is an Ethiopian-American who came to the U.S. as a political refugee and fulfilled her dream of studying law to help other victims of persecution. And Jodi Goodwin, a white woman from Texas who speaks fluent Spanish, played a key role in reuniting parents with children who had been snatched from them by U.S. border officials.

In Tijuana, Ethiopian-American immigration attorney Mulu Alemayehu speaks with a group of Haitian migrants.

While the film centers around these four lawyers —true modern-day heroes fighting for their clients against seemingly insurmountable odds — the film gives equal time to the stories of the migrants they helped.



Gisselle, a 20-year-old Honduran whose legs were severed when she fell from the Mexican freight train known as *La Bestia*, is seen here with her mother, Sofia, in a migrant shelter in Central Mexico.

There was Yodalys, a woman who fled Cuba in search of political asylum, but was turned back from the U.S. border despite the fact that she was going blind from a parasite and desperately needed medical treatment to save what remained of her sight. Oscar fled Honduras to escape gang violence and government corruption. While living in the Matamoros refugee camp, just across the border from Brownsville, Texas, he helped Charlene identify vulnerable migrants who were legally eligible to enter the United States despite the border being virtually closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the age of twenty, Gisselle left Honduras to rejoin her mother, Sofia, who had already fled to Mexico. In a tragic accident, both of Gisselle’s legs were severed when she fell from the top of a Mexican freight train known as *La Bestia*. After Nancy denounced the assassin who killed her husband in El Salvador, she fled the country with her two



The migrant tent camp in Matamoros, Mexico, just south of Brownsville, Texas. This makeshift camp still exists.

children to protect them from reprisals.

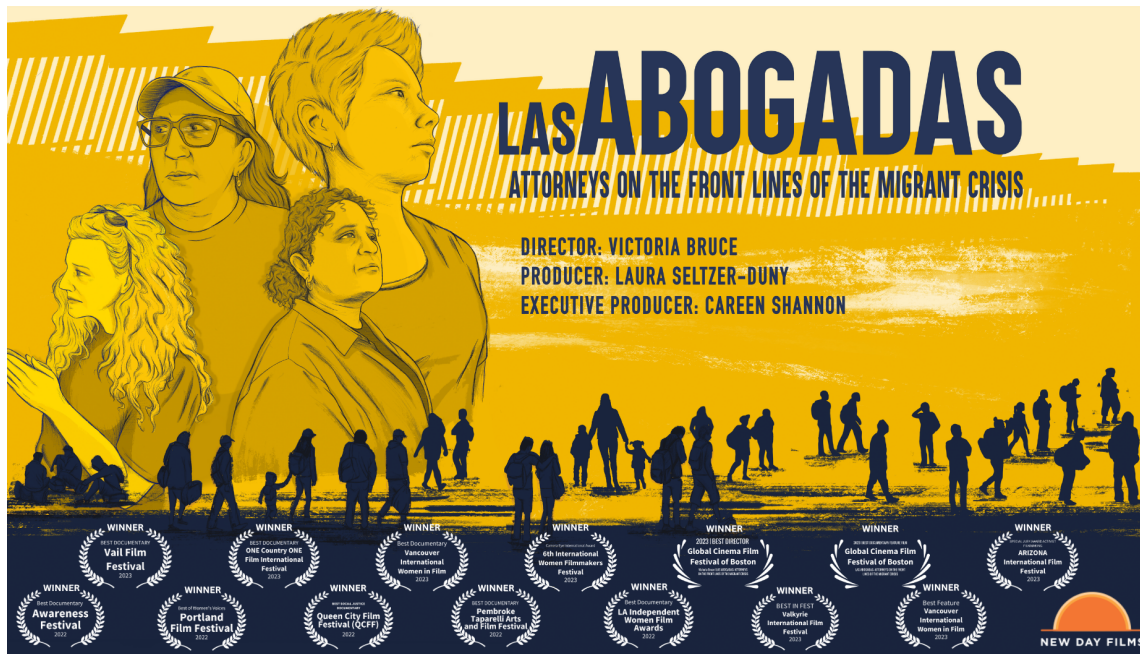
Raisa and Martine, both fleeing persecution and certain death in Cameroon, fled to Ecuador, and then walked thousands of miles through several countries until they made it to Tijuana. We are particularly pleased to have had the opportunity to feature stories of Black migrants, who face barriers to justice caused by structural racism on top of the other obstacles that all asylum-seekers face in trying to re-settle in the United States.

The further tragedy is that, in an election year, immigrants inevitably become scapegoats in the presidential campaign. Mind

you, this happens every four years, with immigrants predictably being depicted as invaders, as vermin, as criminals. This year, however, the rhetoric is especially despicable, with a major party candidate actually spreading hateful lies about Haitian immigrants eating their neighbors' pets. The dehumanization of those perceived as "other" is a well-worn demagogic trick. But the ubiquity of such ploys makes them no less hurtful, disturbing and dangerous.

Las Abogadas raises some fundamental questions that are increasingly relevant today, including:

- What drives some people to become advocates for the rights of others?
- What are the social, political and economic factors that compel people to emigrate from their home countries?
- Should migration be a human right, or are borders an inherent attribute of national sovereignty?
- What are appropriate policies that receiving countries should enact in the face of increasing global migration?



Las Abogadas had a very successful year on the film festival circuit. But we are even more gratified that numerous schools and nonprofits have used the film to educate audiences about the real reasons migrants flee their homes and seek to enter the United States to find safety and security. The film has been shown at high schools, colleges, law schools and graduate schools. Screenings have been sponsored by nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions and associations focused on protecting the rights of immigrants. And in October 2024, the film will be screening virtually as part of the Washington, D.C.-based Immigration Film Fest.

As the Somali-British poet Warshan Shire has written:

no one leaves home unless
 home is the mouth of a shark
 you only run for the border
 when you see the whole city running as well

It saddens us — the film team behind *Las Abogadas* — that the relevance of this message makes our film more important than ever at this moment in history. But we are grateful to have been able to make a film that might be able to play a small role in educating viewers about the truth behind the headlines.