Postville raid documentary to premiere in Iowa next week

Emily Christensen
CEDAR FALLS, Iowa --- The first time Luis Argueta heard about the immigration raid at the Agriprocessors kosher meatpacking plant in Postville, he brushed the news tidbit aside.

Then he read a New York Times article profiling Erik Camayd-Freixas, the certified Spanish federal courts interpreter brought to Waterloo following the unprecedented workplace raid. Camayd-Freixas wrote a 14-page essay explaining how the immigrant defendants he translated for did not fully understand the criminal charges they were facing or the rights they had waived.

"Those 14 pages made me say I needed to go and see this for myself," Argueta said.

With that trip a new passion was born.

"The idea was to be there for four days, do some interviews and then post them on YouTube as part of a series on immigrants I was doing, which were portraits of people three or four minutes long, and that was it," Argueta said.

Those four days turned into 29 trips to Postville.

And from those trips was born "abUSed: The Postville Raid," a documentary chronicling the struggles of the families affected from Postville to Guatemala. The film will premiere in Iowa and the Midwest Feb. 8 on the University of Northern Iowa campus. In the days before the Iowa premiere Argueta will show the film at the Göteborg International Film Festival in Sweden.

"The story totally grabbed my attention, my heart and my mind," said Argueta. "I thought it was a very complex story and an event that I could not let go without trying to make everyone in this country know about it. What happened there was unconscionable."

Mark Grey, director of the Iowa Center for Immigrant Leadership and Integration at UNI, is "excited and honored" to host the long-anticipated Iowa premiere.

"What this film does very well is look at the role of immigration in our workplaces and the elaborate interplay among immigration, work forces, food production and the consumer, and it's all placed in the context of our outdated immigration policies, which clearly need reform," Grey said.

The location for the premiere also was fitting. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers set up a detainee camp at the National Cattle Congress fairgrounds in nearby Waterloo. More importantly, Grey said, several university staff members have worked with Argueta and the people of Postville to write books, papers and even create an archive that tells the story of the small community's rapid diversification and the subsequent immigration raid.

Argueta's work won't stop with this documentary. He said a short follow-up film is already in the works. He also is working on Web-based educational modules that could be used by schools and communities to explore the themes touched on in the documentary.

"Like I say in the playbill, I want to create a new narrative about immigrants, one that helps us seen them not as the 'others' but as our neighbors," Argueta said.