



Dreams of Music Come True in “Going Varsity in Mariachi”

NEWS

January 22, 2023 6:45 PM



PARK CITY, UTAH – JANUARY 22: The cast attends the 2023 Sundance Film Festival “Going Varsity in Mariachi” premiere at Park Avenue Theater on January 22, 2023 in Park City, Utah. (Photo by Michael Loccisano/Getty Images)

By Peter Jones

In Edinburg, Texas, mariachi music just might be the ticket out of town.

For high-schoolers in rural west Texas, the regional music of western Mexico is more than entertainment and a source of ethnic pride. It is almost a way of life. And it could be these students' best chance at going to college and pursuing their life's ambitions. *Going Varsity in Mariachi*, which premiered January 22 at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, is a kind of *Hoop Dreams* with music — an inspiring film that transcends its subject matter with a universal story.

In a town just 17 minutes from the Mexican border, the dedicated mariachi band at Edinburg North High School is readying for the all-important state championships, facing the daily challenges of any team competition while navigating the complicated lives of its teenage members. Coach Abel Acuña is more than a music teacher to these students. He is a life coach who meets the students where they are and lovingly leads them, even when his love gets a little tough around the edges.

“Abel, as you can tell, is not about the trophies. He’s about how mariachi music can help you get safely into adulthood and how important it is to just come together and be a family,” the film’s co-director Alejandra Vasquez told the audience after the screening at the Park Avenue Theater.

Amid the COVID epidemic and school-budget shortfalls, Acuña uses meditation exercises and strong motivational encouragement to keep the students — and the music — upbeat, but he also isn’t afraid to pull a player off the field when he or she isn’t giving the music all the time and energy it deserves.

Acuña learned the transformational power of mariachi through his own experience.

“When I joined mariachi in high school, it changed my life,” he says to the audience. “My mentors and, of course, my orchestra director and my teachers kind of guided me... I wasn’t thinking about going to college, but my mentors are the ones that really pushed me to do more. So I decided I wanted to pay it forward and become a teacher myself.”

Going Varsity in Mariachi is about far more than music. It’s about challenge and opportunity. One student in the film comes from a nonmusical family of pig farmers. Others face the struggles of burgeoning sexual identity and nonconformity. Many will never attend college without a scholarship, and mariachi’s unmistakable mix of guitars, trumpets, and violins may be their last best hope of getting one.

“I didn’t think I was going to cry today,” Vasquez says of the stories her film tells. “I really hope that people see themselves in these students... I just really hope that people have a totally new understanding of mariachi music and what it means to a lot of people.”

Going Varsity in Mariachi is the kind of documentary that could well inspire a narrative remake with characters, place, and motivation that tell a time-honored story of dream and dedication.

By the way, the team just achieved its most recent state qualifiers.

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