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Resource Review

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Resource Review

Timothy S. O'Connell

Daughters of the forest: Saving the forest one girl at a time [DVD]. Directed by Samantha Grant, Oley, PA, Bullfrog Films, Inc., 2017, 56 minutes, \$295.00, ISBN 1-941545-79-3

The quote “If you educate a girl, you educate the whole community” by Martin Burt, the founder of the Mbaracayú School, captures the essence of this documentary filmed in and around the Mbaracayú Forest Reserve in Paraguay. With declining forested areas, pressure from big agri-business for more land, and limited opportunities for girls to get an education and employment, the Mbaracayú School opened in 2009 to teach young women to make a living without destroying the forest and to take the knowledge and skills they've learned back to their home communities.

This documentary will appeal to instructors and scholars from a number of academic disciplines including experiential education, environmental education, women's and gender studies, social justice, Latin American studies, and Indigenous studies. By examining the lived experience of four girls at the boarding school, this film demonstrates the efficacy of receiving an education while honouring the struggles and successes of these young women. For many of these students, attending the school is their first time away from their families and home villages. Adjusting to living with people from different backgrounds and cultures, facing gender inequities and inequalities, and pressure to get pregnant are a few of the obstacles confronted by these girls.

The filmmakers are successful at painting a realistic picture of what life is like for these young women and examining the processes and programs used by instructors to educate these students. For example, the film demonstrates the power of experiential and environmental education by showing the place-based activities used at the Mbaracayú School. Students explore the jungle around the school and learn about the variety of plants, animals and sustainable practices that can benefit them and their communities. This

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is particularly important as people living around the Mbaracayú Forest Reserve are generally poor and view logging and other resource extraction as a primary means of making money. Additionally, while large agri-business company lands surround the Reserve, there is little economic gain for local people through employment opportunities or inflow of money back into local communities. Through the lessons learned by developing and running businesses (e.g., raising and selling native tree seedlings) as part of a third-year project, these young women not only realize the economic viability of sustainable practices, but gain practical knowledge and skills they can take with them back to their home communities.

From a women's and gender studies and social justice perspective, this documentary explores how the Mbaracayú School attempts to confront teen pregnancy through sex education courses at the school as well as culturally ingrained beliefs about gender roles and opportunities for girls and women. Filmmakers note that Paraguay has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the world with approximately 30% of teens having at least one pregnancy. This rate is more than double (70%) for young women from Indigenous communities. While discussing sex and pregnancy is generally taboo in most homes, the Mbaracayú School offers sex education courses to help these young women understand the choices they have. However, the film highlights the tension between modern techniques and traditional cultural practices when it comes to ways of not getting pregnant. For example, some young women's cultures have traditionally used herbs (that may not actually prevent pregnancy) as a method of avoiding getting pregnant. Instructors at the school provide information about this as well as modern methods of contraception.

As students at the school rotate between classes and work assignments, young women learn that they can do the same jobs as men and have the same rights as men do. Students harvest the sesame crop (which women normally don't learn how to farm), work with dairy cows, prepare food in the school kitchen and work at the hotel. One important business run by these young women is a plant nursery. Landowners with large amounts of acreage buy up to 30,000 seedlings at a time as they are required to have 25% of their property maintained as forest. The nursery supports reforestation efforts, demonstrates sustainable business practices, and teaches biology to the students. Additionally, as government funding is not enough to support the school, these businesses not only teach these young women life skills and confidence, but also support the financial needs of the school.

The filmmakers do an admirable job of highlighting the challenges and successes of both the school as a whole and the four young women who were the primary focus of the documentary. The film could do more to ex-

amine what happens to young women who decide to withdraw or cannot continue at the school, especially those girls who are of Indigenous background. Aptly, the documentary closes by showing where each of the four young women who were primary subjects in the film end up. While not all immediately reach their goals, each expresses gratitude for the opportunity to graduate from school and stress the desire to continue to pursue their individual dreams. While there are some additions that would make this documentary stronger, it is recommended as a resource for experiential education, environmental education, women and gender studies, social justice, Latin American studies, and Indigenous studies instructors.