



## For Immediate Release

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## **Brothers' Road Trip to Bury Mother's Ashes Unearths the Saga of a Mexican American Family in P.O.V.'s "Calavera Highway" Tuesday, Sept. 16 on PBS**

Rosa Peña Left Her Seven "Golden Boys" a Legacy of Strength and Pride – And Troubling Questions About the Family's Past

*Produced in association with American Documentary | P.O.V.; A co-presentation With Latino Public Broadcasting*

*"... beautifully crafted road movie... It's a simply terrific film about family, identity and melting-pot America in the 21st century." - Michael Fox (SF360, Independent View)*

The seven sons of Rosa Peña, a migrant worker and single mother, were raised in the Texas border towns of Hidalgo County, the poorest county in the United States. She worked hard, had two husbands –she chased off the second one with a knife when he beat one of the boys – and instilled in her sons a strong sense of family and ethnic pride. With Rosa's death her grown sons were left adrift. As recounted in the award-winning new documentary **Calavera Highway** by filmmakers Renee Tajima-Peña ("Who Killed Vincent Chin?" P.O.V., 1989) and Evangeline Griego, Rosa's funeral and cremation brought the boys together – and tore them apart again.

**Calavera Highway** has its broadcast premiere on **Tuesday, Sept. 16, 2008** at 10 p.m. on PBS, part of the 21st season of P.O.V. (Check local listings.) American television's longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television's premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films, and is a 2007 recipient of a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking.

Six years after their mother's death, a road trip undertaken by brothers Armando (the filmmaker's husband and the film's narrator) and Carlos to reunite their siblings and return her ashes to the Rio Grande Valley reveals just how complex Rosa's legacy is for each of her sons. Their journey takes them across the American west and central Mexico, into a murky past and into questions that probe not only Rosa's life, but their own struggles to find identities as men and as fathers.

Armando and Carlos, accompanied by Armando's son, Gabe, make an unlikely if oddly complementary pair for this quixotic road trip. Armando cared for Rosa in her last days and kept her ashes at his home in Los Angeles. The family bookworm, he is anxious to answer questions that nag all the brothers, but consume him in particular. What really happened to Pedro, the first five boys' father? Was he swept up in the notorious 1954 government deportation program, "Operation Wetback?" Why had Rosa's own family so cruelly rejected her, leaving her and her sons to fend for themselves?

Carlos, the funny and volatile brother, hides the pain of a childhood bereft of a father, behind a jovial manner. A migrant counselor who still lives in the Rio Grande Valley where the boys grew up, he thinks it is best to leave some memories alone. In fact, **Calavera Highway** (“Skeleton” Highway) uncovers more hard truth than even Armando could expect.

In a circuitous route, up from L.A. to Washington State, back down to the Rio Grande with a side trip into Mexico, the brothers retrace some of the same highways they had traveled in their youth as migrant farm workers. They remember the brutal days working in the fields as children, even on weekends and holidays, but also the camaraderie they shared. They recall their lives as fatherless street urchins, anchored by their mother’s love, hard work and pride.

Armando and Carlos also seek out their mother’s oldest friend, Rosa Morales; Armando’s college friend Cynthia Orozco, whose own father had run-ins with immigration and who researched the period of Operation Wetback, when Pedro Peña disappeared; members of the extended Peña clan who had rejected them as children; their maiden aunt, Adela; Rosa’s sister; and even Eddie Gonzalez, a local politico in Elsa, Texas, who attests to Rosa’s feisty defiance. (Rosa’s activism found its echo in Armando’s participation in the historic 1968 Edcouch Elsa school walkouts, a milestone in a year of Chicano student actions across the Southwest.) Along the way, the brothers sift through evidence about Rosa, about Pedro, about the Peña clan – and about their own choices.

Armando and Carlos’s first stop is the San Joaquin Valley of California, where brother Luis has risen from picking beets to running the water treatment plant in Wasco. No one has spoken with Luis since the funeral, which he refused to attend because Rosa had been cremated against his Christian values. A thousand miles away, in Moses Lake, Wash., Lupe and Raul pursue far different lives. Though a warm family man in his own way, Lupe has never lost his love of the fast life and is just out of prison when Armando and Carlos show up. Raul lives down the road and seems inclined to follow the elder Lupe’s lead. A talented painter as a youth who turned down a university scholarship, Raul was arrested on a drug charge with Lupe just a week after Rosa’s death.

Back on the Gulf Coast of Texas, Junior, the baby of the family, works as a pipe fitter for Dow Chemical. He is, perhaps, the least troubled. The eldest brother, Robert, who lives nearby is the one who has vivid memories of Pedro Peña, and who remembers with the greatest bitterness Pedro’s sudden disappearance and Rosa’s subsequent years struggling as a barmaid or working in canneries and fields with her sons.

What, after all, happened to Pedro Peña? Had he been swept up, as rumored, in Operation Wetback? Had he settled in the mountains of Mexico and drunk himself to death? Or had he prospered as a stonemason and started a second family? What made Rosa an outcast among her own family, and they so ready to marry her off at a young age? And most importantly, how had this legacy of migration, poverty and family skeletons, shaped the lives of the seven brothers?

The answers to these questions accumulate over stages of the journey with *Rashômon*-like effect, painting an ever-more complex picture of Rosa, the hard choices she faced and the determination with which she faced them. For Armando and Carlos, there are more answers, and plenty of surprises. But the most astounding surprise of all is reserved for the restless and curious Armando – when he uncovers a secret that he could never have imagined.

**Calavera Highway** is a sweeping drama of the Mexican American migrant experience, as revealed in the passage from one generation to the next. It is the intimate story of seven brothers who took that journey. Six years after Rosa’s death, they find themselves separated by geography and haunted by the feeling of a family dispersing, even as Rosa’s ashes, in their journey to the border, tug insistently at each brother’s heart and memories.

Director Renee Tajima-Peña is a Japanese American filmmaker whose previous work has explored the Asian American identity. "My Japanese grandfather migrated to work on the sugar plantations in Hawaii in the early 1900s," she says, "at the same time that Armando's grandparents began crossing over from Mexico to work in Texas. I always wondered what forces in history and culture shaped the different trajectories the families took.

"I felt I had completed my search for my Asian roots when I finished 'My America...Or Honk If You Love Buddha,' the time when I married Armando Peña," she continues, "so when I felt an urge to traverse different landscapes of race, culture and family, it seemed only right to follow him on his journey to understand his past."

**Calavera Highway** is a Rosasboys Production in association with P.O.V. | American Documentary. It is a co-presentation with Latino Public Broadcasting and is funded in part by the Center for Asian American Media with funds provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

#### **About the filmmakers:**

##### **Renee Tajima-Peña**

##### **Director/Producer**

Renee Tajima-Peña was nominated for the documentary Academy Award for "Who Killed Vincent Chin?" which opened the 1989 season of P.O.V. Her 1997 film, "My America...Or Honk If You Love Buddha," was an award-winner at the Sundance Film Festival. Her other directing credits include "The Mexico Story" for Kartemquin Films' collaborative series on immigration; "The New Americans" (IDA Award winner); "Labor Women"; "The Last Beat Movie" (Sundance Channel); and "The Best Hotel On Skid Row" (premiered at Cannes, aired on HBO).

Tajima-Peña has been awarded the Alpert Award in the Arts for Film/Video, two Rockefeller Fellowships in Documentary Film, a Peabody Award, a duPont-Columbia Award and other honors. She began her filmmaking career at Third World Newsreel and Asian Cine-Vision in New York, and has been a film critic for *The Village Voice* and cultural commentator for NPR. She is the Graduate Director of the Masters Program in Social Documentation at U.C. Santa Cruz. She lives in Los Angeles.

##### **Evangeline "Vangie" Griego**

##### **Producer**

Evangeline Griego is an award-winning independent producer/director of the documentaries "Paño Arte: Images from Inside" and "Border Visions/Visiones Fronterizo." She collaborated with Tajima-Peña on "The New Americans," the multi-part series and the special "My Journey Home," both for PBS. More recently, Griego co-produced the new documentary "Chevolution" (Red Envelope Entertainment/Netflix and Arte) and produced "Sir! No Sir!" (Sundance Channel). She is the co-founder of the Silver Lake Film Festival in Los Angeles. She serves on the board of directors for NALIP (The National Association of Latino Independent Producers) and the OUTFEST Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian film festival. She is currently in production on the feature documentary "God Willing," about a Bible-based nomadic cult. She lives in Los Angeles.

#### **Credits:**

Director/Producer:	Renee Tajima-Peña
Producer:	Evangeline Griego
Executive Producer:	Jeff Bieber
Cinematographer:	Jonathan Schell
Editor:	Johanna Demetrakas
Original Music:	Brian Kirk and Sharon Smith, Noel Hernandez/Frijoles Romanticos and Rene Gasca
Running Time:	86:46

## Awards & Festivals:

- World Premiere, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, April 2008
- Golden Gate Award, Best Television Documentary-Long Form, San Francisco International Film Festival, April-May 2008
- Best Feature Documentary, San Diego Latino Film Festival



Created in 1998 by Edward James Olmos and Marlene Dermer, Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB) is a nonprofit organization funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. LPB's mission is to support the development, production, post-production, acquisition and distribution of non-commercial educational and cultural television that is representative of or addresses issues of particular interest to U.S. Latinos. These programs are produced for dissemination to public broadcasting stations and other public telecommunications entities. Mr. Olmos is presently LPB's Chairman of the Board of Directors. For more information please visit [www.lpbp.org](http://www.lpbp.org).



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and celebrating its 21st season on PBS in 2008, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought more than 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V. is available at [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov).

### ***P.O.V. Interactive*** ([www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov))

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces special features for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based and educational content. P.O.V. Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*, and the *P.O.V. Blog*, a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films. The P.O.V. website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

### ***P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education***

American Documentary | P.O.V. works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, P.O.V. offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, P.O.V.'s *Youth Views* works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training in order to use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, The Educational Foundation of America, The Fledgling Fund, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Lower Cultural Council, The September 11th Fund, and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.'s *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston and Thirteen/WNET New York.

### ***American Documentary, Inc.*** ([www.amdoc.org](http://www.amdoc.org))

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

**DVD REQUESTS:** Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.



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