

## FILM REVIEW

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(USA)

*East of Salinas: A Story of Immigration, Childhood, and Circumstance*, a documentary film by Laura Pacheco and Jackie Mow

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*East of Salinas* (2015, 53 min., SDH captions, Bullfrog Films) depicts three years in the lives of José Anzaldo, the child of migrant farmworkers based in the area around Salinas, California, and his third grade teacher, Oscar Ramos, who also was a child of migrant farmworkers. José’s mother and stepfather affirm that they want him to do well in school, so he will not end up working in the fields. However, his mother fears that her son’s undocumented status may be a barrier to achieving any education past high school. The parents struggle to pay basic expenses, such as rent, electricity and even food. In one scene, José talks about how he feels when he has to go without food. And yet, José is curious, loves learning, and is good at math. In several scenes, we see him doing his homework, and striving to excel in school, in spite of all the difficulties, which the film illustrates very well. The stepfather has to be separated from the family for several months every year when he migrates to work in the fields in Arizona. The mother only has seasonal employment. When the mother works in the fields during the fall, she wakes the children up at 4 a.m. to take them to a sitter’s house, where they wake up again at 6 a.m. to go to school. The family moves several times: once





because they could no longer afford the rent, another time because the apartment had too many insects and rats, and once because the children witnessed a shooting just outside of the house. Each time José and his siblings have to start at a new school. The mother often requires the children to play inside the house, because she regards it as too dangerous for them to play outside. Early in the film, we learn that Oscar has been teaching in this community for 15 years. Most of his students are children of migrant farmworkers. Given his background, Oscar speaks Spanish and relates well with the children and parents. He recognizes that José and his other students need extra help and opportunities to learn. He takes a special interest in José, and after one of the family moves, drops by to pick up José and his brother to take them to school, so they can finish out that school year with the same teacher. The film depicts Oscar's classroom teaching, and a field trip to the Exploratorium, which the students thoroughly enjoy. Their curiosity is evident in the footage. Oscar also hosts an event at school to talk to parents about cultivating learning, which also offered free food and used clothing. Towards the end of the film, Oscar takes a group of children, including José who was attending fifth grade at a different school, to visit the University of California-Berkeley, from which Oscar graduated. He shows them the dorm room where he lived, and the students learn what it is like to sit in a huge lecture hall. José comments that he had never seen a university before.

He also had never seen the ocean, which he finally manages to see through school activities. Oscar shares his own history with José and other children, so they can learn that it is possible to study hard and strive to go to college. Several of Oscar's college friends also have not forgotten their roots as children of migrant farmworkers. The film shows them getting together once a year to purchase and distribute Christmas presents to the children in Oscar's class.

The film is compelling. It depicts everyday life in the home, at work, and at school. It covers three years, showing the seasonal variations. Viewers watch José, who at the beginning of third grade says he wants to become a fireman or a cop, move towards wanting to become a teacher like Oscar, and then towards wanting to become an engineer. The film not only depicts the hardships of migrant farmwork for the parents and their children, but also addresses the effects of being undocumented in a mixed status family. José's two siblings were born in the U.S., but he was born in Mexico and is undocumented.



The mother notes that he does not have access to Medicaid health insurance, and adds that luckily he does not get sick, and luckily he did not get sick during the three years of filming. We also see that José had to stay in Salinas by himself while his mother and siblings went to visit his grandmother in Mexico. Oscar, the teacher, also understands what it means to be undocumented. He mentions that he was lucky enough to have legislation pass that allowed his family to legalize their status, but he was worried about the possibilities for similar policy changes that could benefit

José. Oscar described what it was like when he was five, and he and his sister watched as immigration officials raided their babysitter's house and arrested and deported her. This film is timely, given the current debates about immigration. It would be excellent for classroom use, as well as for general audiences.