

# Changing the Debate

*When We Stop Counting*  
focuses on immigrant  
families already here

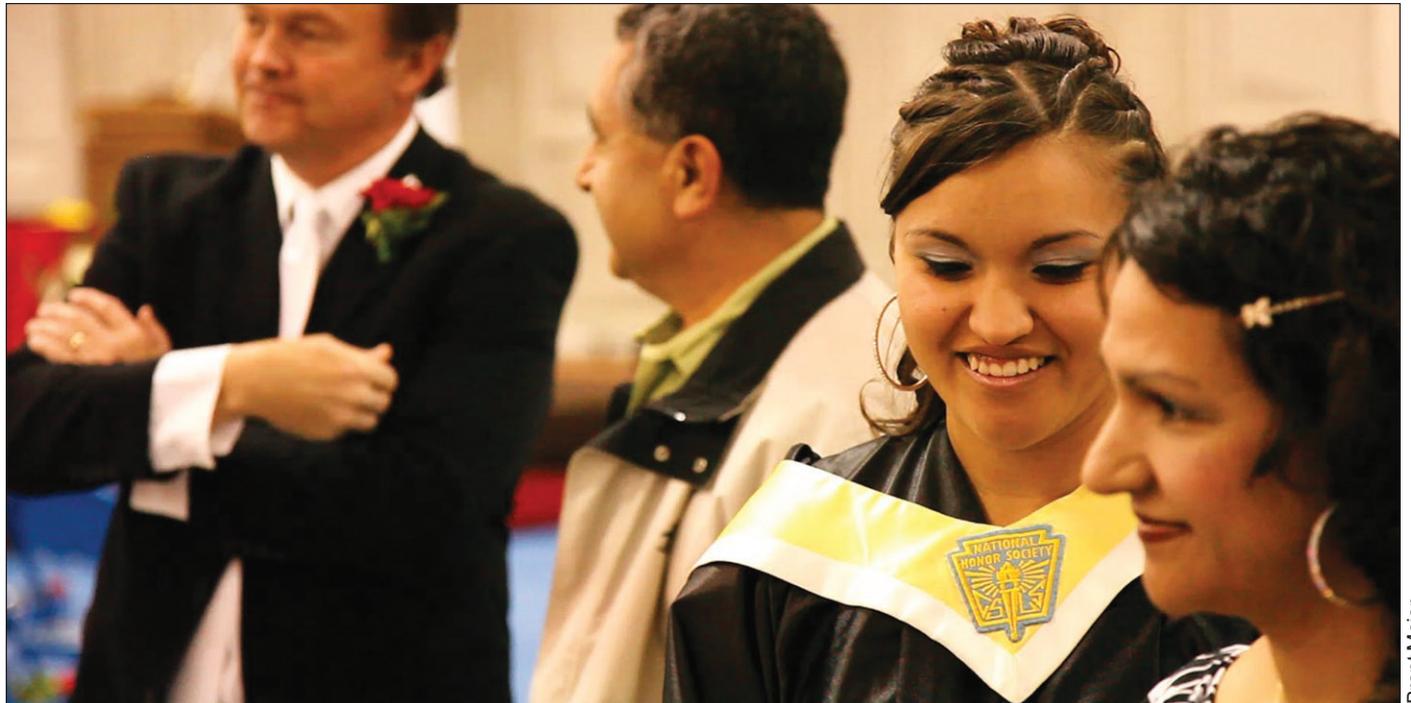
[by Laura Schreier]

The creators of *When We Stop Counting* say they aren't trying to have a discussion on immigration law enforcement or amnesty — the documentary is the real-life drama of six Latino students in Crete's public schools, set against a backdrop of their lives as first-generation Americans or immigrants.

But it's also about a school system faced with staggering population changes. In about a decade, Crete's public schools have gone from almost no minorities to a 50 percent Latino student population. Co-filmmaker Elisabeth Reinkordt, video production and multimedia specialist at the Nebraska Department of Education, wants the documentary to re-frame the debate away from immigration politics and instead showcase how Crete rose to the occasion.

*When We Stop Counting* has drawn crowds to its first few screenings, and is just getting warmed up. Its next public screening is at Lincoln's Indigo Bridge bookstore on Dec. 9, and its filmmakers hope to show the film as widely as possible.

"The more eyes that see it, the better" says Brent Meier, formerly of Lincoln community agency El Centro de Las Americas. He collaborated with Reinkordt on the project. Meier and Reinkordt poured countless hours into assembling the grant-funded documentary, and while it elaborates on Crete's successes, Meier says the students are the film's heart.



Brent Meier

**Maira (second from right) graduates from Crete High School. Her parents immigrated from Mexico 10 years ago.**

Each armed with a camera, the six students documented an entire school year through graduation day, which Meier and Reinkordt spliced together with talk about Crete's school system.

In the students' raw footage, the filmmakers found a wealth of drama and challenges as these students shared their surprises and setbacks, and grew into capable filmmakers in their own right.

Reinkordt recalls one particular student's experience at a border crossing into Mexico. On a family trip to visit his father, the young man's mother was forced to bribe a

Mexican border guard to secure passage for his younger sister, an American citizen.

The boy pulled out his camera and started taping, she says, narrating for the camera. This kind of corruption was one of the reasons his family wanted to get out of Mexico in the first place.

"What he's experiencing on a personal level deals with a much broader issue," Reinkordt says, and shows something not only about him, but about his realization that there's power in telling these kinds of stories.

The documentary also showcases what Crete did to help these students become part of the school community. The school

reached out to Farmland Foods, the meat supplier that drew Latino immigrants to Crete in the first place, to set up adult GED and English classes.

"That doesn't happen everywhere," Reinkordt says. Crete's high school also has the state's only certified bilingual guidance counselor to work with students and their parents. That's a huge help with explaining the school system to the entire family, as well as a major symbolic gesture, welcoming those families, she says.

Ideally, the film will put a human face on a heavily politicized topic, Meier says: "We don't need any more negative press on the immigration issue."

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