

## THE STORY

In the 1970s the Bronx was on fire. Abandoned by the city government, nearly half a million people were displaced as their close-knit, multi-ethnic neighborhood burned to the ground. While insidious government policies caused the devastation, Black and Puerto Rican residents were blamed for the devastation even as they battled daily to save their neighborhoods.

## THE GENESIS OF the FILM, DECADE OF FIRE.

DECADE OF FIRE began as curriculum on the history of Bronx activism, that Julia Steele Allen, an educational justice organizer, developed in 2002, for incoming ninth graders at a social justice themed high school in the Bronx. It explored the relationship between the burning of the Bronx in the 1970's, the cultural resistance movements of graffiti and hip hop, and the block-by-block community organizing that saved the borough.

Vivian Vazquez Irizarry worked with Julia at the time and was supportive of the curriculum. As a child of Puerto Rican parents, she had grown up in the South Bronx during the fires. She and Julia began talking about the legacy of the burning, both for the survivors and for young people growing up in the Bronx today. They felt that the real story had never been told.

In 2008, Vivian and Julia joined with documentary filmmaker Gretchen Hildebran and the three of them began working on Decade of Fire, the story of which has as much currency and resonance now as it did then, for people living in cities all across the country.

## THE FILM

In DECADE OF FIRE, the film follows narrator Bronx-born Vivian Vázquez Irizarry as she pursues the truth surrounding the fires – uncovering policies of racism and neglect that still shape our cities, and offering hope to communities on the brink today.

Through a rich seam of archival and home movie footage, DECADE OF FIRE confronts the racially-charged stereotypes that dehumanized residents of the South Bronx in the 1970's, and rationalized their abandonment by city, state and federal governments. Vázquez Irizarry, in her role as the film's central character and co-director seeks not only healing for her community, but to redeem them from the harmful mythology spread by the media that has continued largely unchallenged to this day. She tells the story of a people who held on, worked to save their community and start anew against impossible odds. The accounts she gathers are supported by extensive research, archival footage, print and broadcast news excerpts, testimonials from retired FDNY firefighters and brass, as well as Bronx historians.

Through exposing the history, and lifting up the stories of survivors whose deep commitment to their homes and communities saved the borough, DECADE OF FIRE offers the emergence of a new narrative for the South Bronx and places like it across the nation.

## DECADE OF FIRE AS AN ORGANIZING TOOL

Communities across the United States face a growing crisis of displacement, homelessness, and gentrification. DECADE OF FIRE is partnering with grassroots organizations who are building tenant power and fighting for the right to live with dignity in our nation's cities. Each screening is followed by a dialogue, highlighting local leadership and concrete ways people can become involved in housing justice and anti-displacement struggles where they live.

#### THE PARTICULAR RELAVANCE OF SCREENING DECADE OF FIRE AT CUNY'S GRADUATE CENTER

As we've said the film developed from a working friendship between two women, one Anglo and upper middle class and the other, Puerto Rican from the neighborhood, who when they met had finished her university studies and gone back into the community to live and work.

DECADE OF FIRE, is a powerful example of what can be accomplished when Praxis meets theory, when research meets civic action, when knowledge uncovers civic dissembling.

This is a documentary that crosses over many disciplines, Women's Studies, Urban design, Humanities, Race relations, Social sciences, film studies (**I need help on this Dana**)

The movie vividly and movingly demonstrates the power of working together to make change, and as such will not fail to energize and inspire the advanced degree students as they go forward into the world after their studies. It will provide new possibilities in how they can use their academic gifts to give back to the world.

#### THE TWO PRESENTERS FOR THE SCREENING

##### GRETCHEN HILDEBRAN

Gretchen is a documentary filmmaker and editor whose work lives at the intersection of politics, policy and human experience. Credits include: WORTH SAVING (2004), which was presented in HBO's Frame by Frame showcase; OUT IN THE HEARTLAND (2005) which explored anti-gay legislation in Kentucky. A 2005 graduate of Stanford's documentary program, Gretchen shot Ramona Diaz's THE LEARNING (2011) and has edited for the History Channel, PBS and the United Nations Development Programme, as well as on independent documentaries. Gretchen has also made a series of short documentaries used to educate communities across the country about life-saving interventions such as needle exchange and overdose prevention.

##### VIVIAN VASQUEZ IRIZARRY

An educator and facilitator, Vivian ran educational and youth leadership development programs at the Coro Foundation, Bronxworks, and is currently the director of community-school partnerships at the New Settlement Community Campus. Vázquez Irizarry managed educational youth development models in GED completion and college access programs across New York City. A former member of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, she is a member of 52 People for Progress, a community organization that saved her childhood playground and revitalized the South Bronx for the last 35 years.