

THE DEVIL'S MINER

BY KIEF DAVIDSON AND RICHARD LADKANI

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Living in poverty with their mother in the mountains of Bolivia, 14-year-old Basilio and his 12-year-old brother, Bernardino, work long shifts in the Cerro Rico silver mines, braving deadly conditions to earn enough money to attend school. *THE DEVIL'S MINER* follows the brothers into the underground mining tunnels as they tempt fate in order to gain a better life.





FROM THE FILMMAKER

We initially set out to make a documentary about the rich history and religious dichotomy of the Cerro Rico miners. When we arrived at the Potosi mines for the first time, the overwhelming presence of working children in dangerous conditions immediately caught our attention. We soon determined that telling the story from the eyes of a child, who still had a chance to educate himself and escape his destiny, would be the most effective way to tell the story.

The challenge for "The Devil's Miner" was finding a young boy who could carry and narrate a feature-length film. After interviewing over a dozen families, we were introduced to Basilio Vargas, who captivated us with his positive energy, intelligence and articulate speech. Basilio, along with his younger brother Bernardino and sister Vanessa, were completely natural in front of the camera. The family enthusiastically agreed to participate and welcomed our crew into their home.

Filming in the mines was no easy task. The likelihood of tunnel collapses, toxic gases, runaway carts and dynamite explosions created constant anxiety. At an altitude of almost 15,000 feet, we relied on chewing coca leaves and chocolate bars to battle relentless headaches and fatigue. Joining us on the shoot were Tobias Cortes, multi-talented sound operator and 2nd unit cameraman, and two local mining guides. These expert guides were essential in navigating a virtual maze of over 20,000 tunnels; one wrong turn could drop you down a dark shaft with no hope for rescue.

In the claustrophobic tunnels of Cerro Rico, we chose to shoot with a small format digital camera, as anything larger would have been impossible. The miners' open-flame carbon lamps were used as the main source of lighting. These lamps could also detect poisonous gases; if the flame blew out, that indicated the need to leave immediately. Often the temperature changed within a matter of seconds. When it reached

110°F (40C), work became unbearable. Concern for the boys grew as we experienced their reality firsthand. We tried to capture the unfolding drama without losing sight of the child's safety. We were constantly faced with the moral dilemma that many filmmakers are faced with: at what point do you stop shooting and intervene? We did intervene a couple of times when we felt Basilio was seriously at risk, but overall we felt it was important to show the harsh reality of the miners.

It was not until we finished editing that we realized the film's potential to raise awareness about the global issue of dangerous child labor. We contacted the International Labor Organization, ILO, and the United Nations, and they immediately screened the film at their headquarters, Geneva and New York City respectively. We continue promoting aid organizations dedicated to sustainable solutions and eradicating poverty in Bolivia like Kindernothilfe and Care International. In the summer of 2005, Kindernothilfe hosted a screening in Cochabamba, Bolivia for politicians and a group of child miners, including Basilio and his brother who were able to see the film for the first time.

The US Department of Labor has funded a 4-year education initiative operated by CARE for mining children in Potosi that will end in 2006. We hope that with the film's visibility in theaters and public television and the support from the United States will not disappear. Complicating matters is the inability to bring in safer machinery for drilling since the mountain pinnacle is a World Heritage Site. While most mines on Cerro Rico are cooperatives (owned by local Bolivians) and child labor officially illegal, the cost of tin has sharply risen as a result of the war in Iraq. Therefore more youths are, by default, attracted into the mines. It truly strikes us how one event so far from South America can have such a profound impact on the young lives in Bolivia.

- Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani



THE FILM

Fourteen-year-old Basilio Vargas and his 12-year-old brother, Bernardino, are among the hundreds of boys from families so poor that they have no alternative but to send their sons to work in the dangerous mines of Cerro Rico.

THE DEVIL'S MINER tells their compelling story. Through the children's eyes, viewers encounter the world of devout Catholic miners who worship God above ground, but offer prayers to Tio—the devil—when they go underground. In mining mythology, Tio represents the daily dangers of mining. It is Tio who determines the fate of all who work within the mines.

Key People in Basilio's Life

BERNARDINO VARGAS, Basilio's 12-year-old brother

VANESSA VARGAS, Basilio's 6-year-old sister

MANUELA ARTICA VARGAS, Basilio's 37-year-old mother

SATURNINO ORTEGA, Basilio's first boss

BRAULIO, Basilio's second boss

Basilio's daily life raises issues that reach far beyond his family and his community, including structural poverty dating back to enslavement by the Spanish of Basilio's Indio ancestors. Yet despite their desperate situation, Basilio's family believes there is a way out. With fervent optimism, they see education as the savior, and their commitment to sending Basilio to school leaves viewers with a glimmer of hope that things can improve for this remarkable boy.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

History of the Cerro Rico Silver Mines

In the 16th century, when the Spanish conquistadors invaded the South American highlands, they discovered a treasure so valuable that it financed Spanish wars for centuries. The treasure was a cone-shaped mountain they named Cerro Rico, the Rich Pinnacle. Cerro Rico turned out to be the largest silver find in the history of the Americas. The mountain provided more than two-thirds of the world's silver and funded the rise of one of the richest cities of the time, Potosí. But the splendors of Potosí came with a price, that of human misery. The Spanish enslaved the local Indios and forced them to dig for minerals under inhumane conditions. It is believed that over the last four centuries, more than 8 million workers have perished in the mines, earning Cerro Rico a reputation in local lore as "the mountain that eats men."

With the Spanish missionaries came the successful introduction of Catholicism—the Potosí miners today remain devout Catholics, and there are more than 40 churches and convents surrounding Cerro Rico. However, the miners do not trust that Christianity can protect them from harm inside the mountain, so they swap allegiance to God with allegiance to Tío (the word comes from a play on the Spanish words for God, *Dios*, and uncle, *tío*, but is idiomatically understood to mean the devil).

Today, 9,000 Potosí miners—often referred to as the "scavengers of Cerro Rico"—continue the job on a daily basis with primitive protection and equipment. At an average altitude of 15,000 feet, breathing is labored, fatal accidents are frequent and most miners fall victim to black lung disease by age 40. Working in a maze of more than 20,000 tunnels, the miners, including hundreds of children, make it their mission to find any remaining valuable minerals overlooked during the Spanish rule. (Adapted from: www.devilsminer.com)



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

General

- If you could ask anyone in the film a question, what would you ask and whom would you ask? Why?
- Which scenes from the film did you find most powerful? Why? Two months from now, what will you still recall from the film? Why do you think those particular recollections will stick with you?
- What new insight or piece of information did you learn from this film? How might that newfound knowledge influence your thinking or actions?

Childhood

- How are the boys' lives like the lives of children you know? How are they different? How do their attitudes toward school compare? What do you think accounts for the differences?
- How do your beliefs about childhood influence how you feel about the boys' childhood? How does Basilio's or Bernardino's daily life match or contradict what you think of as appropriate for children?
- In your view, what is a child's responsibility to his or her family? At what age is it acceptable to ask a child to contribute financially? Why?

Poverty

- The adults in the film regret that children work in the mines. So if everyone agrees that children shouldn't have to work in the mines, why does the practice persist? What might actually bring it to an end?
- Why have industrialized nations outlawed or strictly regulated the practice of child labor? How might you end or restrict child labor without imposing negative consequences on families who depend on a child's earnings for survival? Would American labor laws work for the Bolivian families you see in the film? Why or why not?
- What are the obstacles to Basilio's attending school? What could be changed to make it easier for boys like Basilio to get an education?
- Why do the miners give Tio offerings of cigarettes, alcohol and coca as opposed to other substances or things? What does the offering imply about the role of these addictive substances in the miners' lives?
- According to the film, many miners die of lung disease by the time they are 40 years old. How would your life be different if you knew that your life expectancy was 40?

Religion

- What does Basilio mean when he tells his brother that Tio can "eat your soul"? Are there nonliteral ways to interpret the concept? In what ways does Tio serve as a metaphor for the real-life experience of the miners?
- What kind of religious training have children in your family received? What are the differences and what are the similarities between the things that Basilio has learned about Tio and the religious stories commonly shared with American children (for example, Santa Claus)?
- The priest observes that the miners "live in a world of fear." What kind of fears do you have? How do they compare with the fears the miners have? How do the miners deal with their fears? How do you deal with your fears?
- In your view, how do the miners' religious practices serve them? What benefits does their faith provide them with? In what ways might their beliefs hold them back?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as individuals and as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- Contact antipoverty organizations in your community to find out how you can help their efforts.
- Contact organizations that are helping the children who work in Bolivian mines (see the film website for links). Hold a fund-raiser to help support their work.
- Coordinate with local youth agencies and schools to help poor children in your community tell their own stories. Sponsor a video or writing workshop and host a mini-festival—film or book—at which the work can be shared with the public.
- Host a screening of *THE DEVIL'S MINER* for middle school students (the age of the boys in the film). Use the film to help young people understand the resources and privileges from which they benefit and help them find ways to help those who have less.

For additional outreach ideas, visit itvs.org/outreach, the website of Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit to pursuing one item from the brainstorm list.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION

To Start

www.devilsminer.com –The official website of the film includes production notes, background information and information on how to help the boys.

Bolivian Mines

<http://www.globalpolicy.org/socecon/inequal/labor/2003/0324b/olivia.htm> –This links to a 2003 article from The New York Times that provides an overview of the Bolivian silver mines and the situation of children who work in them.

Child Labor

www.ilo.org –The website of the International Labor Organization of the United Nations includes fact sheets on child labor and a special report on children in mining, "Digging for Survival: The Child Miners" (www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inf/event/cl2005/index.htm) . Additional information on child labor, especially among Latin American indigenous peoples, is available at www.UNICEF.org.

Poverty

www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty.html – Check the website of the U.S. Census Bureau for official government statistics on poverty.

www.irp.wisc.edu/ –The Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin is one of three government-funded regional research centers in the United States. Their website includes an excellent collection of links to organizations working to alleviate poverty.

THE DEVIL'S MINER WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON TUESDAY, MAY 23rd, 2006 AT 10:00 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS Community works to leverage the unique and timely content of Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities, and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.itvs.org/outreach.