

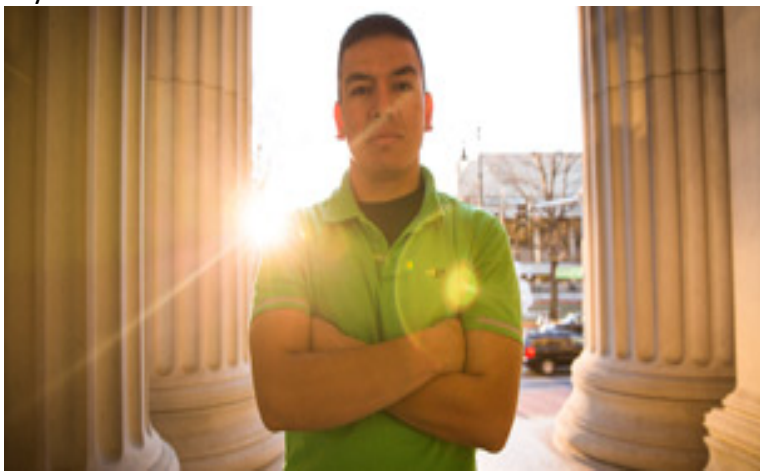
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Film Review: Underwater Dreams

As captivating as it is important, Mary Mazzio's seemingly modest tract about immigration achievement grabs you by the heart, as it grows and grows into something big and vital.

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-By David Noh



The year is just half over, but already a contender for best documentary of 2014 is looming with Mary Mazzio's *Underwater Dreams*. What starts out as a high-school competition study—compelling enough on its own, as so many of these like-themed films are—pulls a breathtaking fast one in its second half, expanding its basic inspirational theme to embrace an even larger message, with an organic efficacy that is nothing short of astonishing.

Mazzio focuses on four male students from Carl Hayden Community High School, a Title One school in Phoenix, Arizona, where most live in poverty. In 2004, this intensely likeable and funny ragtag bunch of Mexican immigrants, all without documentation, won a prestigious NASA-sponsored annual underwater robotics competition, even decimating the entitled team from M.I.T. With their robotic underwater prober named "Stinky" for reasons which were literal, a quaint contraption slapped together from parts purchased at Home Depot, they were able to best the sleekly high-tech model created by their rivals (with Exxon sponsorship) through sheer determination, divinely sparked by pure ingenuity. Example: When Stinky's PVC pipes sprang a leak and began to sink from incoming water, one of their number came up with using tampons to absorb the moisture, even though that called for one embarrassing visit to the store.

A decade later, the boys are invited to M.I.T. to meet their competition again and relate their stories since then, which have also engendered a flourishing program at Carl Hayden, now legendary in the educational field for the number of graduates it has successfully sent on to college. While the M.I.T. kids are unsurprisingly ensconced in cushy, prestigious tech jobs—one even having invented the ear buds emitting the music the world bops to—the Carl Hayden boys are mostly eking out a living, working for minimum wage in fields like catering and janitorial, while trying to set up small businesses. However, one of them, Oscar, even went so far in his determination to become documented that he turned himself in, was deported, and eventually returned to the States, where he enlisted and has served two tours of Afghanistan duty.

The reasons for this professional discrepancy go beyond mere race or obvious socioeconomic roots and have everything to do with this country's oppressive immigration policy, particularly

Arizona's inhuman Proposition 300. And it is at this point where the film kicks into a universalist high gear, with a thrilling demonstration of how one small incident of immigrant triumph not only can reflect but motivate change. The smart, alert, engineering-besotted generation of students at Carl Hayden, who followed that original dream team, is particularly active in demonstrating for change, and we see their inspiring, risk-taking efforts, including a sit-down before a bus deporting immigrants back to Mexico. Engineer Dulce Matuz—who created the Arizona Dream Act Coalition, a youth-based organization dedicated to gaining higher education and immigrant rights—spearheaded this movement, is extensively interviewed here, and was named one of *Time* magazine's most influential people. Illinois senator Dick Durbin, who heard about the boys from Matuz, has made this issue a priority, and eloquently lauds their achievements as well as excoriating the sad and ridiculous fact that only a piece of paper separates them from being total Americans in every other way, while the lack of such has them treated as criminals.

Again and again, Mazzio captivantly returns to the faces of the original four, as well as the terrific kids inspired by them, who are still surprising everyone with their achievements. The reasons for a serious revamp of America's immigration policy become mountainous as you watch this movie, and it's a genuine Kleenex-requiring tearjerker by the end.