

WHILE YOU RETURN

A Week in the Life of a Family
of a Political Prisoner

Press kit





Technical specifications

ORIGINAL TITLE:	Mientras regresas
ENGLISH TITLE:	While you return
DURATION:	45 minutos
PROJECTION FORMAT:	DCP
ASPECT RATIO:	16:9
COUNTRY OF PRODUCTION:	Nicaragua
YEAR:	2024
LANGUAGE:	Spanish, English
SUBTITLES:	English, Spanish



Logline

A woman in exile fights to free her husband, a political prisoner in Nicaragua, while caring for their 9-year-old daughter.

Synopsis

Berta Valle, an exiled journalist and popular television host from Nicaragua, fights for the release of her husband, **Félix Maradiaga**, unjustly imprisoned in their country, while raising their 9-year-old daughter, **Alejandra**.

Félix, a renowned human rights defender, is one of seven presidential candidates detained by Daniel Ortega's Sandinista regime before the 2021 national elections. He was detained under inhumane conditions, isolated and without any communication with his family.

The documentary offers an intimate glimpse into a week in the life of Berta and Alejandra, and their quest for a miracle that might reunite them with Félix. Their story reflects the struggle of hundreds of families, who are fighting for the release of their loved ones imprisoned by the Ortega regime as it seeks to eliminate political dissidents in the country.



Background

In 2018, the regime of former Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega brutally repressed the largest peaceful protests in Nicaragua's history, known as the April Rebellion, where people demanded an end to violence and transparent elections.

The repression triggered the worst humanitarian crisis since the Sandinista-Contra war in the 1980s, leading to 356 deaths, mostly at the hands of police and paramilitaries groups following orders from the Sandinista leader and his wife and vice president, Rosario Murillo. These deaths were documented by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS, Amnesty International, the UN, among others. However, they remain in total impunity.

Since then, the government has implemented a plan to imprison any social leader, human rights defender, or protester who participated in the April Rebellion and stamp out any expression of dissent, alleging that the protests were part of a coup to destabilize the country.





In a final attempt to restore democracy , and after several failed dialogues with the government, opposition parties made a massive call to participate in the 2021 presidential and parliamentary elections. Several candidates, including Félix Maradiaga, director of a prominent think tank and a human rights defender, hoped to become candidates against Ortega and overcome the crisis through an electoral process.

However, starting in May 2021, Ortega's government unleashed a new wave of arrests, imprisoning dozens of journalists, business people, students, farmers, human rights defenders, and seven presidential candidates, ending the possibility of an electoral resolution to the conflict

Félix's wife, Berta Valle, a well-known television host, and activist, began the tortuous path to secure his release and, along with dozens of families, the release of hundreds of political prisoners who suffered total isolation and torture in prison.

As a result of the crisis, hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans have fled the country and are now exiled in different parts of the world.

Director / Producer

LEONOR ZÚNIGA

Leonor Zúniga is a Nicaraguan filmmaker, cinematographer, and producer. She holds a Master's in Documentary Film from Stanford University and a Master's in Cinematography from Goldsmiths, University of London. She is a Fulbright and Chevening Scholar. She has directed short films like *Docktown* (2016), *Exiled* (2019), and *Madelaine* (2022). She is the co-founder of Juli Films (2010-Present), where she has co-produced feature documentaries like *El Canto de Bosawas* (2014) and *Patrol* (2023), among others. She was the cinematographer for the Belgian documentary *Los minúsculos* (Torino FF, 2021) and is the producer of the documentary *Pantasma* (in development), recognized with the first prize of the Open Doors program at the Locarno Film Festival. Her films have been selected at film festivals such as Hot Docs, Torino, Big Sky, Curta Cinema, St. Louis International, Mountain Film Festival, Tallgrass, San Diego Latino, among others. She was selected by *Estrategias y Negocios* magazine as one of the 50 most innovative women in Central America (2022) and by *Forbes* on its list of 100 powerful women in Central America (2023). She lives in exile in Costa Rica. Leonor is co-founder and strategist of SÉ HUMANO (2021-Present), a permanent campaign against the torture of political prisoners in Nicaragua.



Director's Statement



This documentary represents my third work on exiled women fighting for freedom in Nicaragua. The first was the short documentary *Exiled* (2019), about Zoilamérica Ortega Murillo, the adopted daughter of dictator Daniel Ortega, who accused him of raping her when she was a child. *Madelaine* (2022) is about the student leader and visual artist Madelaine Caracas, who played a crucial role in the student protests in Nicaragua and the start of the April Rebellion, and more recently, *While you return* (2024) my first medium-length film. The film tells the story of Berta Valle, a well-known television host in Nicaragua who became one of the strongest voices and human rights defenders in the country. She is the wife of Félix Maradiaga, who inspired her tireless fight to free him.

I did not plan to make these three documentaries; somehow, they came to me organically, surely because of searches I was making as an artist, woman, activist, as well as the historical moment in my country which affects us all.

At the center of my search has been my interest in understanding how state violence, violence amongst citizens of the same country, and violence against women occur, which, as an exile, I have experienced directly.

This documentary is also the continuation of a desire to contribute in some way to reconciling my country, perhaps through these women who can teach us about how to experience politics from a different place. All of them have been radical individuals, who asked uncomfortable questions, confronted much greater powers, and somehow resisted the temptation to build more walls between us or promote hate.

Like the previous documentaries in this trilogy, my curiosity and my lens prioritize the personal world over the public, the everyday over the grandiose, the home over the stage—a place where I have always found more humanity and more answers to my questions. My films explore the intimate and emotional side of injustice.



Production notes

- This documentary began production in June 2022 and was completed in September 2024. It was produced by the Central American production company Juli Films, with the support of RELIAL and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.
- Originally, it was going to be a short film about two families in exile fighting for the release of two political prisoners. After completing a first version of the film, the documentary evolved into a longer project focused on the story of Berta and Alejandra.
- The original filming was supposed to last only one week; however, shortly after finishing the first version of the documentary, 222 political prisoners, including Félix Maradiaga, Berta's husband, were released and unexpectedly exiled to the United States. This led to filming of the second part of the story, showing Félix's return home.
- In the first part of the filming, Alejandra, Berta and Félix's daughter, does not show her face in the film, a decision made by her and her mother to protect her safety. However, this changes in the second part of the film, after Félix's release, when Alejandra decides to show her face.
- After Félix's release, Berta and Félix decided to promote the creation of an international treaty to protect dissidents and human rights defenders worldwide, called END ARBITRARY DETENTION.

Impact Campaign: End arbitrary detention

The END ARBITRARY DETENTION initiative is a project created by Berta Valle and Félix Maradiaga, aimed at promoting an international treaty that prohibits the arbitrary detention of individuals involved in political activities. It focuses on protecting human rights activists, dissidents, and political activists from authoritarian regimes and dictatorships that use arbitrary detention as a tool to silence critical voices.

Arbitrary detention and political imprisonment are serious and widespread issues worldwide. From Cuba and Venezuela to Nicaragua, China, Russia, and other autocracies, thousands of people face unjust detentions due to their struggle for democracy and human rights. While international treaties for human rights protection exist, a more robust and specific approach is needed to address this global epidemic.

On the website [**endarbitrarydetention.org**](https://endarbitrarydetention.org) you can find information on the importance of protecting dissidents and human rights defenders, along with compelling data and testimonials that highlight the urgency of this issue. The latest updates on the progress of the project and the steps being taken to foster international change will also be shared.



Social Media

www.mientrasregresas.com



Twitter



Instagram



Facebook



Credits

DIRECTOR:	Leonor Zúniga
PRODUCER:	Leonor Zúniga
CO-PRODUCER:	Camilo de Castro
EDITOR:	Leonor Zúniga
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY:	Leonor Zúniga
ADDITIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHY:	Camilo de Castro Claudia Hurtado
SOUND:	Claudia Hurtado Alicia Henriquez



Production company behind *While you return*

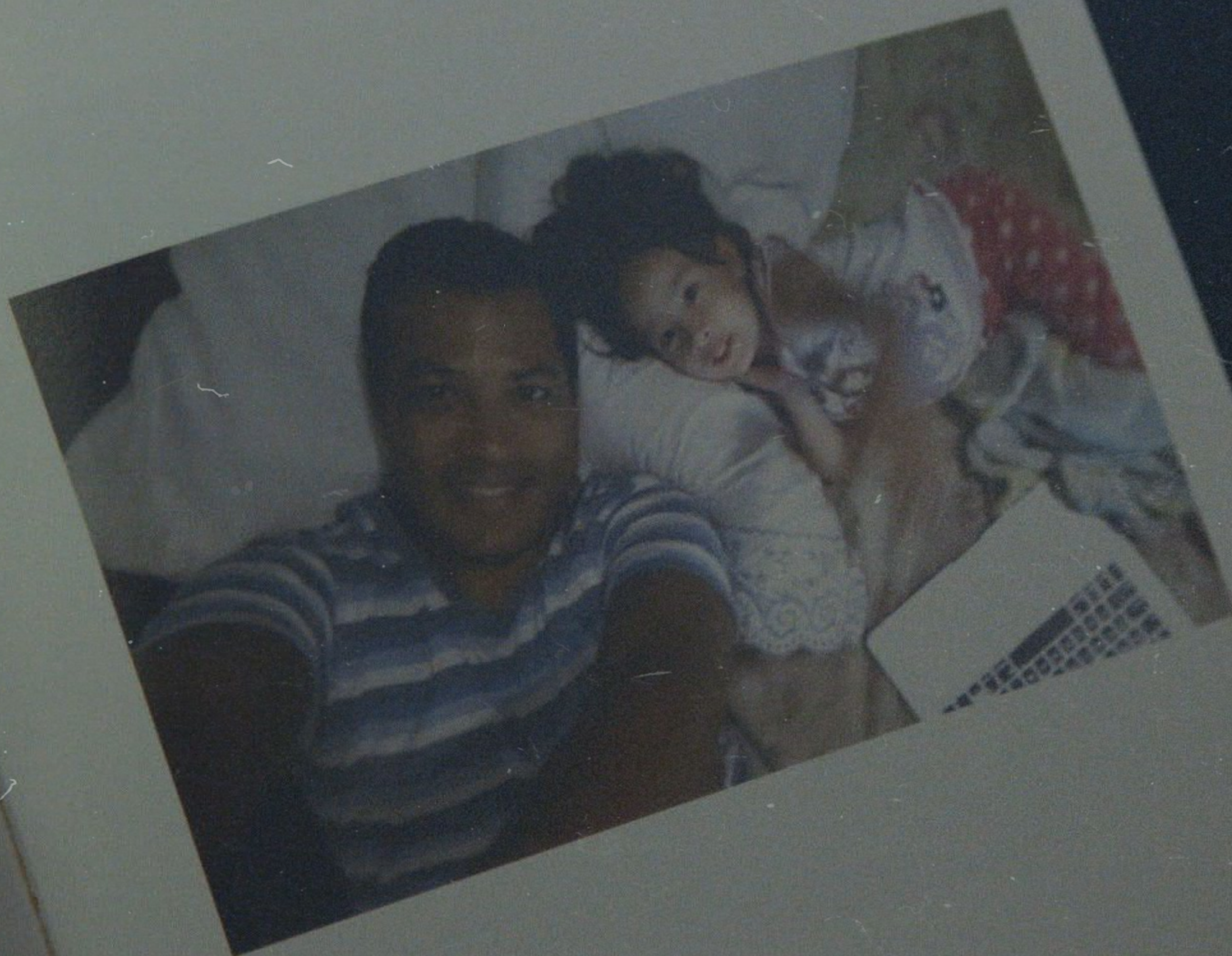


Juli Films is a Central American production company specializing in innovative communication for social change. Since 2010, it has produced documentaries and campaigns focused on the environmental crisis in Nicaragua and human rights abuses in the region. The documentary *El Canto de Bosawas* (2014) was the second most successful national production in Nicaragua's history. More recently, *Patrullaje* (2023) reveals the impact of illegal cattle ranching in the Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve. Its documentaries have been selected at festivals such as Hot Docs, Big Sky Documentary Festival, Mountainfilm Festival, Curta Cinema, Saint Louis, Tallgrass Film Festival, and others. The production company is led by filmmakers Camilo de Castro and Leonor Zúniga.

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