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## How ‘Huella’ Director Gabriela Ortega Found a Fairy Godmother in Film Producer Sandra Conditto



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COMMENT

“It was really special,” filmmaker Gabriela Ortega says of the first time she met film producer and UnbeliEVable Entertainment executive Sandra Conditto.

It was in September 2020 at a virtual event called InFocus: Latinx and Hispanic Cinema Film Festival, put on by NewFilmmakers Los Angeles and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

“I was there with my first short film that I ever made, called ‘Papi.’ It’s a documentary about my father in the Dominican Republic,” Ortega adds.

The ‘Papi’ filmmaker was also a fellow of Lena Waithe’s Hillman Grad Productions and Indeed job site’s Rising Voices Fellowship. Waithe produced Ortega’s latest short film, ‘Huella,’ about a flamenco dancer who is visited by her ancestors after the death of her grandmother reawakens a family curse.

As a Los Angeles-based arts and culture non-profit organization, NFMLA has been focused on championing emerging storytellers from around the world for fourteen years. Its year-round programming slate includes the NFMLA Monthly Film Festival, the InFocus diversity and inclusion series, the Best of NFMLA Awards, the DocuSlate Documentary Film Festival, and the CineCessions Student Mentorship program.

NFMLA’s goal is to connect up-and-coming filmmakers with executives who can help them hone their skills and foster industry connections.

“Before we even had these industry meetings, NFMLA would get us on a Zoom and ask us what we’re looking for and what kind of executives we want to meet. They cater to our needs as filmmakers,” Ortega says. “To my surprise, one of those meetings was with Sandra Conditto. And, you know, I had heard of Sandra, but I wasn’t connecting all the dots until we got a rundown of the people we were meeting, and I was so excited.”

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At the time, Conditto was the senior vice president of international production and development at Sony. Now, she’s the president of film and television at [Eva Longoria’s UnbeliEVable Entertainment](#). She’s worked on Robert Rodriguez’s *Spy Kids* franchise as well as his film *The Adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl in 3-D*.

Conditto immediately saw potential in Ortega’s filmmaking ability after seeing ‘Papi.’

“The subject matter of Gabriela’s short was very touching to me. I have my own relationship with my father that was very, very close. Before then, he had already passed, so it was a very emotional connection. She also made a beautiful film,” Conditto says.

They both share a Dominican background, as well, Conditto notes: “The icing on top was that she was one of my people.”

Soon after they met at the NFMLA event, Conditto invited Ortega to pitch her take on a script for an animated film.

“It was her first taste of real studio experience in the sense of pitching, but it was also maybe a little bit of a studio disappointment,” Conditto jokes. “Most projects end up in a little bit of development hell, or whatever that might be. But I brought her in right away to give us a take on a Mexican local-language movie that I was making at Sony at the time.”

Gabriela Ortega pitched her take on the film along with six or seven other writers. She ended up getting the job.

Soon after, Sandra Conditto left Sony, and Ortega did not ultimately go forward with the project. But she gained some valuable experience, and two years later, Ortega and Conditto’s professional relationship continues to grow.

“Sandra gave me my first shot — my first real playing field shot. At no point did I feel like I was coming in as a first-time writer there,” Ortega says, calling Conditto her “fairy godmother.”

“Sandra really fought for me for this project, and I really know that it was because she believed that my take was special.”

Sandra Conditto already has plans to bring Ortega to UnbeliEVable to pitch more ideas.

“One of the first things I did coming into UnbeliEVable and having that platform was to bring it up to Eva Longoria and say, ‘You should see ‘Huella.’ You should know this writer. And sure enough, Gabriela is coming in and giving us takes on open writing assignments, in addition to an original piece that she wants to bring in to UnbeliEVAable and pitch.”

Ortega is excited about what the future holds.

“The big takeaway from it all was understanding when the dream of this business becomes an actual career, and that we as creatives have that agency,” she says. “It’s not just about making shorts and just hoping that they get into festivals, but how can we find ways to sustain ourselves as filmmakers in this industry?”

NFMLA executive director and co-founder Larry Laboe says the purpose of festivals is to “bring new work to audiences where they otherwise wouldn’t get to see them.”

The organization is committed not only to the festival experience but to what happens after, as well.

“They really need tangible resources to be walking away from at the festival,” Laboe says. “Gabriela has been such a fighter on her end, just making it happen. You have to have that sort of entrepreneurial spirit in addition to being a creative, so she’s a prime example of that. But at the end of the day, what the festival hopes to do is bring people together to where they can not only meet each other and collaborate once, but build a lasting relationship.”

*This story first appeared in the Spring 2022 print issue of MovieMaker Magazine.*

*Main Image: Gabriela Ortega and Sandra Conditto pose together in the Dominican Republic. Photo courtesy of Sandra Conditto and Gabriela Ortega.*