

July's Sunday Corner With Lee Liberman – PUZZLES: When Hate Came To Town

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When economic pain is widely felt, hate crimes result -- 250,000 annually. The 53 minute documentary, **PUZZLES**, by **Tami Gold** and **David Pavlosky** of Hunter College, NYC, is a small engrossing tale of the collision between poverty and homophobia in the charming coastal town of New Bedford, MA, a once-upon-a-time rich whaling and industrial hub. In February of 2006, the mixed gay and straight bar Puzzles suffered a hatchet and gun attack by a troubled youth on 3 bar patrons, shaking the community from top to bottom. (The perpetrator fled the attack scene and died by his own hand 3 days later in Missouri, having killed two others.)



You can smell the salt and the sea, tread the cobblestones, and witness the faded industrial past of this now blue-collar, rough-hewn, but engaging small city that has fallen from its heyday but remains close-knit and resilient. The filmmakers take you there. The voices of a middle-age victim of Jacob Robida, the hatchet-wielding 18-year-old perpetrator, members of his teen gang, the Juggalos, and both gay and straight patrons of the bar Puzzles immerse you intimately into the ugliness of the attack and its ripple effect on the community.

It may seem that the film will focus only on the personal stories of the traumatized attack victims, bar patrons, and bereaved teens shocked by the violent act of their friend, Jacob, but the filmmakers spend the right amount of time on the reparative work done in New Bedford -- the fight back via words and community action. Special efforts by political leaders, police, schools, and the advent of Gay Pride events (above and below) have begun to heal wounds and improve harmony in the city. One bar patron explains that the event helped make things right for gay people in town who began to stop hiding. It is thought that 75% of gay residents were closeted at the time. Bob Perry, one of the 3 victims, had come out only a month before the attack at age 47.

The bar, Puzzles, and its successor, Rainbow's End, have since closed, but ten years later New Bedford has a different social climate. Bev Baccelli, a gay activist in the film from nearby Mattapoisett, commented to SouthCoastToday on the 10th anniversary of the attack: "Out of a tragedy like Puzzles, as horrifying as it was, comes change....Gay people and straight people started talking to each other. Is it a perfect place?...No, but it's a lot better than...10 years ago."

PUZZLES is about as complete, poignant, and meaningful a story of hate and its consequences as 53 minutes allow, but it's worth referencing here to former openly gay House of Representatives members, Barney Frank and Gary Studds, (the latter deceased in 2006), both of whom represented New Bedford in Congress at different times; Frank and Studds add to the picture of a community not innately homophobic but subject to the pressures of poverty and hate propaganda.



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To bring PUZZLES and the filmmakers to you venue: www.OUTmedia.org/contact or call 718.789.1776