

# Your latest news & features for gay NJ

## Puzzles: When Hate Came to Town



Published: Monday, 04 April 2016 03:27

Written by Cora Berke

**en-dur-ance:**The ability to withstand hardship or adversity.



The opening scene in the documentary [Puzzles - When Hate Came to Town](#) zooms in on a weathered sign hanging on a fishing boat that reads “Endurance- New Bedford.”

New Bedford, Mass., about 60 miles south of Boston, was once a thriving whaling town and later a large textile manufacturing town. Now the landscape is dotted with abandoned factory buildings. The US

Census Bureau reported in 2013 that 23.5% of the population lived below the poverty line. Among children under 18, the poverty level was 34%.

We are taken back to Feb. 1, 2006, which according to bartender Phillip Daggett, “started out to be a very normal day.” Phillip was a bartender at Puzzles Bar in New Bedford, which drew a mixed crowd of gay and straight, young and old. The event that occurred there the evening of Feb. 1, 2006 would more than define the meaning of “endurance” for this town.

Daggett said it was “a typical Wednesday night there.” A male dressed in all black entered Puzzles asking if it was the gay bar. After ordering a shot of liquor, he turned and took a hatchet to patron Bob Perry’s head, then proceeded to shoot him in the back. During the chaos that followed, two more patrons would be shot. The suspect turned and ran out the door, leaving an aftermath of pain and horror.



[Puzzles - When Hate Came to Town](#) follows what happens to this close-knit community following this tragedy. I had the opportunity to interview co-producers Tami Gold and David Pavlosky. Tami Gold has been making documentaries for 30 years and is a professor at Hunter College in New York, in the Department of Film and Media Studies. David Pavlosky is also a producer, director and educator in New York. The two met when David was a student in Tami’s program and have a long history and friendship together.

After hearing what happened in New Bedford, they set out the following day. Tami Gold explained that when they first arrived, the LGBT community was in “collective shock.” They began interviewing and filming, although some witnesses were still traumatized and hesitant to speak.

Ms. Gold explained that in small towns, bars such as Puzzles serve as community centers. One of the bar’s patrons, Jody Torres, said the bar was a place where “I could be myself unconditionally” and it was “my warm security blanket.” He was there when the suspect walked in and said “his eyes were really large and terrorized.”

In the days that followed, New Bedford Police identified the crime as a hate crime and the shooter as 18-year-old Jacob Robida, a former student at New Bedford High School. He was found a few days later, driving through Arkansas with an ex-girlfriend. When Police Officer Sell stopped him in Arkansas, Jacob Robida shot him in the neck, killing him. He fled the



scene, and later down the road, turned the gun on his former girlfriend, killing her and then himself in a murder/suicide.

Film producers Gold and Pavlosky take us into the world of Jacob Robida and his friends. Gold said she was criticized for giving them “too much humanity” but wanted to show how his friends felt disempowered and alienated; alienation that leads to hatred towards other groups. We meet Ryan, a young man who said, “When you’re around violence your whole life, you’re going to be violent. If you can’t protect yourself, you’re going to get beat up.”



Robida’s friends were members of a group that follow the rapper/horror band Insane Clown Posse. They call themselves Juggalos and Juggalettes, their symbol being a hatchet man. It’s the music they say, that brings them together as friends and family.

We see pictures of Robida's room, painted red and draped with Nazi flags and Hitler symbolism. In disbelief, his ex-girlfriend Ariana said, “I thought it was a phase.” More pictures surface of Robida, his face painted in white and black like Insane Clown Posse. His mother had sent him to a police mentoring program after he had a run-in with another student. He was described as a “bully.”

The town of New Bedford, reeling from this hate crime, holds a candlelight vigil. Victim Bob Perry said he didn’t come out until he was 47 years old, and was only out in the community for four to six weeks before being struck by a hatchet and shot. He said, “I thought I was going to die.”

In the weeks to follow, the town holds its first “Speak Out Against Homophobia,” bringing together teachers, parents, students and law enforcement. The first LGBT Youth, Education & Schools Task Force is formed.

Retired Assistant Superintendent Lawrence Finnerty, wrote that “The forum was a personal wake-up call for me because I had never known about the pain and feelings of isolation experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students. As an educator, I knew that our school system had an obligation to ensure that students were prepared to acknowledge and respect the diverse world in which they lived.”

The LGBT Task Force went on to partner with “Welcoming Schools,” a national program which addresses anti-bullying in the elementary schools, with specific attention paid to LGBT students and their families. New Bedford started a drop-in center for LGBT youth, run by students themselves.

The filming of *Puzzles* spans several years. We see Ariana graduating and aspiring to go to college for art. The film’s producers said she now lives in Texas with her mom and the move out of New Bedford has been good for them.

Victim Bob Perry said he would have liked to meet Jacob Robida and just ask him “Why?”

I asked Gold and Pavlosky if it was hard for them when filming was over. Gold said, “A film is never over, it’s part of a massive journey.” *Puzzles* has been screened at the University of Massachusetts and in Manhattan. David said their hope is that it will continue to be shown at schools throughout the country to promote awareness.

The film leaves us knowing that hate did come to New Bedford, but with endurance, a community survived and united together.

<http://andersongoldfilms.com/films/documentaries/puzzles.htm>.

<https://www.newday.com/film/puzzles>