Coming Out in Smalltown USA

Documentary explores a Pennsylvania town's attitudes about homosexuality

by Mark Moring

June 21, 2010: When Joe Wilson got married, he put an announcement in his hometown newspaper in Oil City, Pennsylvania. Nothing unusual about that, except that Wilson had married another man--and a picture of the two of them appeared in the paper. Angry, even hateful, letters to the editor poured in; one said that it would've been better for Wilson not to have been born. Wilson responded not in anger himself, but by revisiting his hometown, with his partner and a couple of camcorders, to look into the town's attitudes.

The result is Out in the Silence, a 65-minute documentary that ends up following four main subplots in Oil City. First, a gay teen who was verbally and physically abused at the local high school, and the quest that he and his mother take to confront those attitudes and the school district's refusal to make things right. Second, a lesbian couple that buys a crumbling downtown art-deco theater and renovates it into a functioning civic showcase again. Third, a woman representing the American Family Association who seems to be on a crusade against gays, more anxious to speak out against their "agenda" to take the time to meet or listen to any of them.

Fourth -- and likely most interesting to CT readers -- a local Christian pastor and his wife who had written one of the letters to the editor decrying homosexuality, only to later show tolerance and love toward the filmmakers as they got to know them in the months ahead. The pastor didn't compromise his biblical beliefs at all; he continues to believe that homosexuality is a sin. But, for the first time in his life, he actually gets two know gay people, and by the end of the film is calling them friends. There's some interesting dialogue between the two "sides" as their unlikely friendship unfolds throughout the film. It's really a Christlike response from the pastor.

Though the film is made by two gay men, it doesn't seek to promote a "gay agenda" or to stereotype the "religious right." It's simply a matter of trying to understand attitudes in small-town America. The filmmakers end up advocating for the teenager to the school board and in a civil rights lawsuit, and the local school board ends up admitting they should've done more to help the boy who was abused; they incorporate staff training as a result. Despite some initial opposition, the two women end up re-opening the theater to a warm reception of both gays and straights. The AFA rep never changes, and refuses to look the gay men in the eye or even have a conversation with them. And the pastor and his wife seem glad to have made new friends, though they clearly disagree with their lifestyle.

The film is showing at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival in New York today, followed by broadcast on New York's two largest public television stations, WLIW (June 26, 3 p.m. ET) and WNET (June 27, 11:30 p.m. ET).