San Francisco International Film Festival 2004

Interview with Mary Liuzzo Lilleboe, daughter of Viola Liuzzo

Joanne Laurier
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Mary Liuzzo Lilleboe, the daughter of murdered civil rights activist Viola Liuzzo, made the following comments to Joanne Laurier of the WSWS in a telephone interview from her home in Oregon.

There have been strong responses to the film [*Home of the Brave*] everywhere. My brother Tony was not at the Sundance Film Festival because he had not experienced any success in his attempts to defend his mother's legacy and his country's legacy. He was overjoyed that the film managed to have the impact that he had fought for since his mother's death. Tony and many of us have sought to find people who care about right for righteousness' sake and not for personal gain or power. If you want to start counting the bad guys, start at the top. The goal of all the people in high places is personal gain.

Everybody who sees the film pulls from it a variety of issues—like a kaleidoscope. Civil rights, social rights, family, country, motherhood. The truth is multifaceted. I think Paola's film and our family's story mirror the story of the working people. A certain loss of innocence and the discovery of truth. Our story has a certain parallel to the problems in this country and in the world.

After my mother's death, we were caught in limbo. My dad became an untouchable in the union. Things not only degenerated for our family but for much of the population. Fairness and equality were replaced by inequality and supremacy. Labor unions and their business agents began working for contractors. The unions went from being organizations formed for fair treatment of workers to ones of personal gain for the leadership. And the gap is widening. The original purpose of the unions was a revolution by the people and not only in America.

Here's the thing about my mom and what I think is important for today's world: consequences never dictated her actions. She lived for what was right every day and in every way. I was looking at the FBI files and saw that my mother had written protesting the government's witch-hunt of the labor unions. I remember when Hoffa was giving a speech at a union rally, my mother followed a reporter who was phoning in his story and said: "I just want to know that you are telling the truth."

My mother was raised in the South and she followed the whole labor story. My mother's dad made 50 cents a day in the mines and when he lost his hand, he never got anything from the employer. My grandmother came to Detroit to work for Ford because she could make more in a factory than as a schoolteacher. These things shaped my mother.

My mother did not have a price or a color or anything like that in her fight against what was wrong. When she lost her baby, she left the Catholic Church because she could not believe in its doctrine about unbaptized infants going eternally to limbo. The message she taught us from the time we were little, a message I'm sure she got from her dad, was "Question everything!" She always went to the deepest level that she could go to.

After the San Francisco film festival showing, a man in his 80s named Bill Mandel, who was a journalist called before the House Un-American Activities Committee [in 1960] and refused to name names, stood up with tears in his eyes. It seems like many questions of history are coming back today.

Another example of this is that for 39 years my

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mother's name was never mentioned. Then in an article in *Sports Illustrated*, Sylvester Croom [the first African-American head football coach in the Southeastern Conference]—the head coach at Mississippi State University—said that a tear comes to his eyes when he remembers that mother of five from Detroit who went down South to help the civil rights movement. This is in *Sports Illustrated*, not some political magazine! Things run very deep.

My mother's life is relevant today because it was color-blind. We don't know what to do today. The issues we face are well beyond the immediate. Both the Democrats and Republicans are capitalist and are wrong. I know this lesser-of-two-evils argument and I think it is very narrow in its vision. Knowing the truth about what exists is the most important thing, even if it might be fearful. September 11 was a horrible thing and it broke my heart. But the government, both parties, used it to its advantage. They used it to put in place some of the most frightful legislation.

My mother thought culture was very important. She craved richness, culture, truth and purity. Even though she never finished high school, she read all the time. She was interested in important ideas. Today in our local schools they want to get rid of art and music because of budget cuts. Whatever the reason, it is a tragedy. Music and art touch the soul. They cannot be corrupted. My fear is that they want to take away those pure things that cannot be corrupted. They don't want people to have knowledge. My mother fought so hard for truth and knowledge as a catalyst for political education.

We saw what the government was capable of doing when it felt threatened by what my mother stood for. The organizations that were supposed to defend workers did nothing. The militias developed because workers, like our family, were abandoned. We need something new. Socialism is a dirty word in this country because it threatens people at the top. I don't think it's an accident that people today are attracted to my mother's story. It's also no accident that it's hard to find a distributor. Even the so-called independent PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] said they would only show the film if we deleted any references to the current situation. You can bury the truth, and the people who have fought for it, for just so long. I think today people are becoming ready for the truth.

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