



Main Street, Shenandoah, Pennsylvania.
Photo by David Turnley.

FILM

A Melting Pot Boils Over

by Erica Hellerstein

Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, is a small town with a few defining details.

A lonely pastry shop stacked with empty trays. An iron-clawed bulldozer chipping away at an iconic old church. A misty pink sunrise huddled between the hills. A bustling Mexican restaurant, and a man in a T-shirt that says: “I’m American, so I speak English.”

This is the economically depressed town that Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer David Turnley brings to life in his documentary, “Shenandoah.” In many ways, Shenandoah feels like quintessential small-town America, with residents’ fierce pride and enthusiasm for local happenings like the high-school football game and the Christmas parade, where Santa Claus parachutes in from a

plane. Once a thriving coal-mining town built by Italian, Polish, and Irish immigrants, Shenandoah has been hit hard by the recession and industrial decline. Most recently, Mexican and Latino immigrants have begun settling there in search of farm and factory work.

But something has gone terribly wrong in Shenandoah. Turnley doesn’t reveal this immediately, but he hints at it, with evocative sound bites, ominous music, and lingering pans of the town. Through bits and pieces, we eventually learn about a fatal attack in which four star high-school football players fell upon Luis Ramírez, a 25-year-old farmhand from Mexico.

One evening after a football game, the boys stumbled drunkenly into a neighborhood playground, where one

of them began talking to a girl. At some point, Ramírez came out and yelled something at the boys in Spanish. They responded with profanity and racial slurs and then rushed toward him, knocking him to the ground and dealing football-trained blows that would later result in Ramírez’s death. After the last kick was pounded into Ramírez’s head, the boys darted down the dark street and fled the scene. Later, they seemed to come out unscathed — both from harm and from conviction, as local police attempted to cover up the crime. Ramírez’s death wasn’t widely publicized, and town business proceeded as usual. That is, until Gladys Limón of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund became involved. The California-based civil-rights attorney read a brief summary of the incident online and decided she had to go to Pennsylvania. Limón was adamant that the case get a proper hearing. Her visit led to a media firestorm and discussion about immigration, recession, and racism in the hardscrabble town and beyond. And Turnley was there to document it all.

But the film is less about the tragedy and ensuing trial and much more about Shenandoah itself — and the forces within the town that gave rise to such a complex act of rage. There is something vaguely Shakespearian in the plot and its unsettling moral ambiguity. Nothing is black and white. The boys didn’t crouch in a dark basement for weeks on end, plotting a devious hate crime. Somehow, it just happened. And the senselessness of it all is what’s so difficult to grapple with: there’s no conspiracy, no war, no gang-driven battle. It’s not clear where their blind, white-hot fury came from, or what propelled them to kick Ramírez until his chest heaved and his breath came out in slow, painful rattles. And even more troubling is the overwhelming denial by so many town residents of what really happened — despite clear evidence linking the boys to Ramírez’s death.

Brian Scully, one of the four boys, describes what he felt when he lunged at Ramírez: it was “emptiness. I didn’t even care. I didn’t even worry about him at that time.” As the film progresses, Turnley documents the evolution of Scully’s thoughts and feelings, from a frigid, impassive understanding of the events to an awareness of the lives he affected outside of his own. “I started to think about Luis as a person,” Scully acknowledges later in the film. “He has a family; he has kids.” Of all the football players, Scully is the only one intimately interviewed. And so, his perspective colors the film. It’s through his eyes that we begin to see the enormity of his action register internally. He seems to tiptoe towards this comprehension in a particularly compelling scene. He’s sitting in a chair in

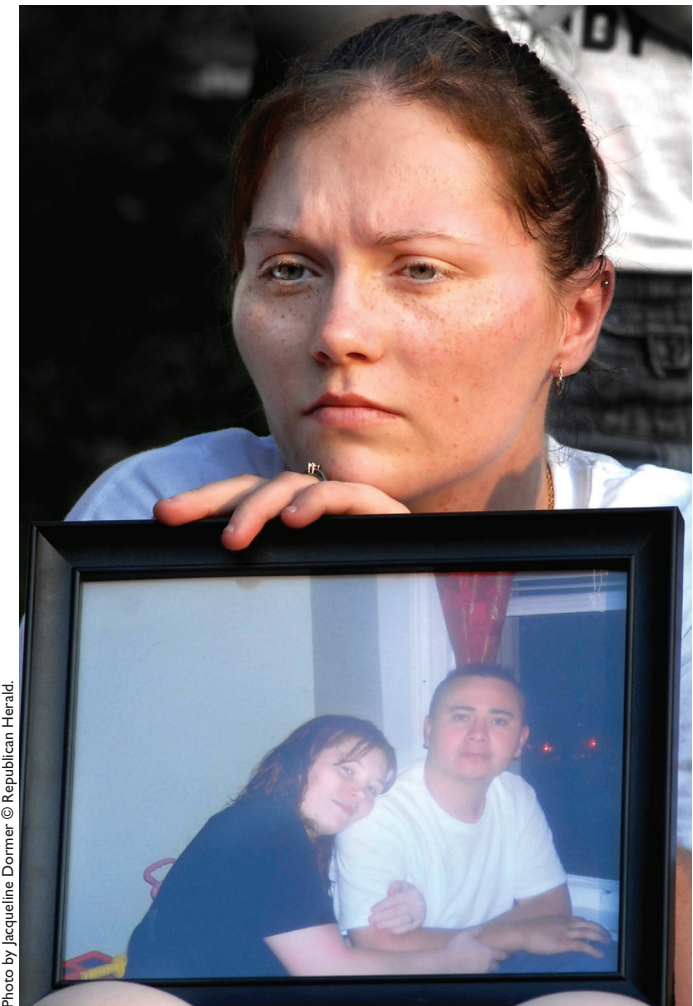


Photo by Jacqueline Dormer © Republican Herald.

Luis Ramírez’s fiancée, Crystal Dillman, with his photo after his death.

his room, squinting at his computer screen and reading the “comments” thread of an article about the trial. “How could this happen?” someone wrote. “Those kids are monsters,” replied another. Scully slowly reads the excerpts aloud, deadpan, and vulnerable. Perhaps, for the first time, the wheels are turning.

There are other, deeply moving moments in the film, such as the scene in which we see Ramírez’s fiancée, Crystal, for the first time. She is gazing at a framed picture of herself and Ramírez. “Dada!” her son squeals as his chubby hand excitedly smacks the glass covering the photo. “Dada!” There are also acts of uncommon courage: one eyewitness to the beating — a retired Philadelphia policewoman — publicly calls it murder and faces ostracism from many in the town.

But there are less redemptive moments as well. There’s the blind rage and xenophobia of some — but not all — of the town’s residents. “He got what he deserved,” and “USA!” chants an American flag-toting crowd at a protest about the trial. “I don’t think he deserved to die,” a woman announces into the microphone, “but Luis Ramírez would have been alive today if he stayed in his own country!” >>

But more than anything, Turnley’s intentioned shots tell the story of a tight-knit but decaying town — where craggy old men lean up against storefronts musing about the fate of a place that was “just like a little New York City in the 1950s” — and the racism that can fester below the surface and explode into violence during hard economic times.

Many of the same themes came up in a discussion with Turnley after the CLAS screening of the film. He shared the stage with Berkeley Law professor Maria Echaveste and Harley Shaiken, chair of the Center for Latin American Studies. They talked about Turnley’s motivations for making the documentary, as well as their own takes on the events that took place in the film.

“In the family that I come from,” Turnley explained, “when Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, my three brothers and sisters and I were in a movie theater, and my parents came and got us and took us home. And when we got home, my mother said ‘We didn’t come to get you tonight because we were worried about what might happen to you. We came to get you because we feel like someone in our own family was killed tonight.’ And that’s the kind of family that I came from.”

Turnley’s political sensibilities — coupled with a crushed dream of playing pro football — eventually led him to photography. “What I saw in photographs was finally what made sense to me. What is equal is human dignity,” he said to a packed crowd. “That’s something you can’t buy and no one can take away from you.”

Echaveste, too, shared her remarks. “As history has shown over and over again, fear and anxiety strike a chord too often in us that leads us to lash out at the stranger among us.”

It was a comment that resonated with many in the audience.

David Turnley is the director of “Shenandoah.” He, Maria Echaveste, a professor at the Berkeley Law School, and Harley Shaiken, the chair of the Center for Latin American Studies, spoke after the CLAS screening of the film on April 29, 2013.

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VIDEO AVAILABLE AT CLAS.BERKELEY.EDU

Gladys Limón speaks at a press conference.



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SHENANDOAH



photographs of the town and its people by
David Turnley

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