



*The Letter.* Ziad Hamzeh.

Reviewed by Lidwien Kapteijns

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## A Civil Rights Victory in Lewiston, Maine

This riveting documentary chronicles the (mis)fortunes of the Somali community of Lewiston, Maine, in 2002-2003. In 2002, this group of recent immigrants, who had moved to Lewiston from other, less safe urban neighborhoods in the United States, became the target of anti-immigrant sentiment and violence. Rather than trying to stem the tide of prejudice and hatred, the newly elected mayor of the city, Larry Raymond, added to it by sending the Somalis an official letter. This letter informed them that the city could not accommodate any more Somali immigrants and that they should tell their friends and relatives to stay away. This led to further harassment and violence and created a climate of fear for Somalis, other black inhabitants, and all those who worked with or supported them. When Lewiston made national and international news, two neo-Nazi groups, the National Alliance and the World Church of the Creator, decided to hold a meeting in Lewiston and push for the expulsion of the Somalis. As, in anticipation of the neo-Nazi rally, pressure on the Somalis and their supporters increased, an impressive alliance of progressive, pro-diversity citizens and citizen-groups, from within and outside of Lewiston, organized in support of freedom, equal civil rights, and good neighborliness. When the neo-Nazi rally finally occurred, on January 11, 2003—carefully supervised by a heavily reinforced local police force—it not only passed without violence but was moreover completely overshadowed by a progressive counter-demonstration of about 4,500 to 5,000 people. What makes this documentary so impressive is that the viewer can hear and see the events unfold through the commentaries of the participants of both the

pro- and anti-immigration lobbies. On the pro-diversity side, the viewer is introduced to an impressive group of highly articulate individuals: two former mayors (one a woman and the other an African American), the governor of Maine (himself of Lebanese immigrant origin), the police chief, the city missionary and other diverse religious leaders, a Hispanic labor union representative, a committed social worker, a business man, a lawyer, as well as a wide range of other citizens, many of them organizing on the basis of their faith. They speak eloquently of the immigrant status and experiences of their own Franco-, Greek-, and Lebanese-American grandparents. In the course of time, they begin to realize that the anti-Somali sentiment is not the result of misinformation and misunderstandings (e.g., that Somalis get enormous amounts of financial assistance denied to poor, white Lewistonians and are bankrupting the city), but that it is based on an unwillingness to hear the truth and therefore on racism. On the anti-immigrant side, the film gives voice to two kinds of white folks. First, poor local residents speak full of resentment about their own poverty and the certainty that Somalis are getting a free ride. Second, members of the two neo-Nazi groups speak about the need to protect the survival of the white race from the onslaught of blacks, Asians, Jews, and homosexuals, and about their own pride in being racist. They also threaten violence to anyone who gets into their space. Thus the period leading up to the rally, as well as the day of the rally itself, comes to life through the deeply felt and carefully articulated comments of people on all sides of the conflict. That Hamzeh, himself an immigrant from Syria, was able to get even the neo-Nazis to speak their

minds straight into the camera adds to the incredible sense of drama of the film. However, this is not a neutral piece—how could it be!—but a carefully crafted documentary about how the good guys won out. <p> After the film reaches its climax with the rally itself, it winds down and concludes with an on-camera and tearful “I am sorry” by Lewiston’s mayor (who spent the day of the rally on vacation in Florida), and some realistic assessments of leading pro-diversity activists, who state that “now the work begins,” and “now we have to live it.” This reviewer would have liked to see more clarity about dates and numbers, including some demographic statistics on the population of this old mill-town that lost so many of its jobs and so much of its prosperity in the 1950s. However, these small omissions do not diminish the value of this informative and beautifully crafted documentary. This is an important document about the struggle for civil rights in the United States and about the challenges of African and Muslim immigrants in post-September 11 America. It is suitable for a wide range of audiences and a must-have for public, high school, and college libraries. <p>

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