

WISCONSIN FILM FESTIVAL***Jerabek* at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival**

Katya Szabados on Tuesday 04/08/2008 12:04:47

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There are few stories more heartbreaking to watch than that in *Jerabek*, a documentary that tells the story of a young man from Green Bay who was killed in Iraq while serving with the U.S. Marines, and his family's confrontation with its consequences. The film was screened in the Wisconsin Film Festival on Sunday, a date that marked the fourth anniversary of his death in combat.

The film was introduced by festival director Meg Hamel and producer Steve Levin, who was a journalist in Green Bay at the time of Jerabek's death. After covering this news for local media, he decided there was a bigger story to be told and asked the fallen Marine's family to open their doors to him to shoot a documentary. Levin concedes that there were times when the Jerabeks was resistant to the idea; indeed, times when father Ken almost threw him out of the house. But they both persisted in the relationship.

Jerabek opens with a scene close to home for many here in Wisconsin; a father and son sitting in an open field at dawn outside Green Bay, waiting for geese with guns drawn. The younger brother of Ryan Jerabek, the family's fallen Marine, is discussing with their father about a desire to join the service himself.

Through this and other scenes, the documentary focuses on the impact of Ryan's death, but also touches on many aspects of community and the war's impact around the world. Both Ryan's father and grandfather served in the Marines back in the day, and we see how this martial tradition affects the family.

Ryan and his memory is introduced to viewers not just through his family, but by close friends and military colleagues who knew him in life and in death. Through their stories, we see Ryan as a shy and likable kid who gained confidence and clarity after joining the Marines. Comrades describe him endearingly, but through them we also see some of the naiveté shown by those fighting the battle for hearts and minds in Iraq.

We watch the soldiers try to reconcile their mission and actions -- "handing out soccer balls and candy" -- with what they see as the locals' abandonment of them. They describe the day of Ryan's death in Ramadi on April 6, 2005 as a turning point when they began to see the Iraqi people -- who didn't warn them of the attack, though they knew of it -- as the enemy.

Mostly, though, we watch a horribly grief-stricken family try to cope with the loss of their son while contemplating the fact that another is looking to join up. Nick, the younger son, can't seem to give anybody a clear reason for his desire. Another brother, Aaron, is the only who doesn't seem caught up in the Marine Corps adoration. Meanwhile, their mother Rita tirelessly does everything she can to honor her dead son; she spends her time making memorials to him and his fallen comrades, sends weekly care packages to Marines in Iraq, and otherwise strives to hold the rest of the family together.

Jerabek screened before a near capacity crowd at the Bartell Theatre. When the film ended, the audience reserved applause and instead seemed to observe a collective moment of silence. Then after the film, Levin returned to the stage to answer questions (of which there were few) and to introduce the Jerabeks.

With the exception of Nick, the family was present for the screening, with friends also in the audience to provide support. During the Q&A session, Ken Jerabek stood up to inform the viewers that his son Nick did indeed enlist in the Marine Corps, and will likely be deployed to Iraq later this year.

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