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COVER STORY :: JUNE 30, 2004

How hot - and fair - is Fahrenheit 9/11

When Michael Moore's latest film, "Fahrenheit 9/11," opened at NCG Eastwood Cinemas and Celebration! Cinema on June 25, hundreds flocked to the sold-out matinee premieres.

In media interviews, Moore says that the title is meant to symbolize the temperature at which "freedom burns." As fans and enemies of the Flint filmmaker undoubtedly know, the key themes in this controversial documentary are the supposedly stolen 2000 election, ignored warning signs of Sept. 11 and the heavy toll of an unjust war at home and abroad. At the NCG Eastwood premiere, I observed tears, cheers and applause.

After the film, I met at the Evergreen Grill with three moviegoers to discuss their immediate impressions: the Rev. Bob Roth, director of the Shalom Center for Justice and Peace, Ray Ziarno, the 2002 Green Party candidate for Michigan secretary of state, and Joe Ross, the owner of the East Lansing public relations firm Communication & Research.

Moore says Fahrenheit 911 is the temperature at which freedom burns. Well, has the film ignited any fires among you?

Bob Roth, 49

The Rev. Bob Roth is the director of the Shalom Center for Justice and Peace at Central United Methodist Church in Lansing. The Frankenmuth native, who has been a driving force behind the Greater Lansing Network against War in Iraq, knew Moore personally during the early days, when he was editing the weekly alternative newspaper the Flint Voice. Roth is also a freelance writer and social

activist.

Ray Ziarno, 61

North Lansing resident Ray Ziarno served as an officer in the U.S. Air Force and has worked for G.M., Sears, the Census Bureau and the Postal Service and as an engineering consultant and political volunteer. The Saginaw native was the Green Party's 2002 candidate for Michigan secretary of state. He's an expert in electoral reforms and supports Instant Runoff Voting.

Joe Ross, 46

Joe Ross is the owner of the East Lansing-based Communication & Research, a public relations firm that specializes in the area of economic and workforce development. Ross is involved with a workforce study in Moore's hometown, Flint. He said that some of his researchers support free market politics and others are "staunch" Democrats.

Ross: As a child, I saw clips and photos in Life magazine of Vietnam, and today I saw two hours of human tragedy and blood. But we're only seeing one view that stresses all the bad things. Moore didn't bring up some of the recent polls in Iraq showing that a large number of people are happy that Saddam Hussein is gone and that Americans have done some work there.

Ziarno: The mainstream media have portrayed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan antiseptically. We haven't seen blood and guts. Under the current administration, the press can't show wounded people or soldiers in caskets. And Vietnam is ancient history for most of the kids nowadays. They don't really know what war is like. Al-Jazeera is so popular in the Arab community only because they're showing images of the war as it really is. Our press is totally one-sided.

Roth: I'm very concerned because I think the contrast between what Michael Moore is doing in the movie and our nightly news is so stark. The Gulf War and this war are the first two in which we didn't see what was going on. We see a video game maybe. I would rather have people have the kind of presentation we saw in "Fahrenheit 9/11" than no presentation at all. Why don't we have a fair press? Why haven't they covered this war? It's been going on for 16 months now!

What did you like about the movie, and what didn't you like?

Ross: Somewhere in the middle of the movie I fell asleep. I did watch a good 1-1/2 hours of it, though. What really was worrying on me is who Moore chose to interview. He has a habit of interviewing people who are totally emotionally attached to the issue. There's a lot of video of soldiers. I would have rather seen some real analysis, rather than just people on the street and the emotional side. If your leg has just been blown off ... As a researcher, I would rather interview those people 20 years from now.

Do you think Moore should rather have interviewed George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney?

Ross: No. I wish he had interviewed the Cato Institute [a conservative think tank]. The problem is that he already knows the result of what he's going for. In the news business, we call this shotgun journalism. Although, I will say that I was shocked as much as I laughed. There's some really funny stuff in there. I'm 46, and I'm embarrassed to admit that I was laughing. Well, everybody else was laughing, so maybe that makes it a little easier.

Ziarno: This is not a documentary movie. This is an op-ed piece by Michael Moore. It's very one-sided. If you're reading his books, you will have the same impression. But I thought he did it very well. This is a shock job. This is like Howard Stern against George W. Bush.

Roth: I think it is a documentary film. Moore is documenting a point of view unapologetically, but he is also documenting stuff that's already in books. It's in the Wall Street Journal, the New Yorker magazine and The Washington Post. He's documenting the emotions. I disagree with Joe, because I can already get the analysis from Cato, American Enterprise and the Brookings Institute on my TV 24 hours a day.

Ross: It wouldn't be entertaining!

Roth: Actually, I do like this kind of analysis, but I think we get that all the time. Who else is showing the human side of the story? People are doing documentaries, but not many are widely viewed. "Fahrenheit 9/11" is on 850 screens nationwide tonight. I think Moore is documenting one viewpoint of the reality of war and the role of money in government.

Ross: One thing that should be brought to light is that you can insulate yourself from war if you live in America. And obviously, folks in Congress have found a way to live their lives and to insulate their children and themselves from actually going to war. I walked out of there today thinking that it annoys me that Moore uses Hollywood techniques to get people to say things he knows they're going to say. But I was also thinking: Goddamn it, this guy gets to say it! And yes, that's pretty cool. But if I look at the history of mankind, from the recent books I have read on social anthropology, I think we're a kinder, gentler nation. I was born into a home on the corner of Martin Luther King and Michigan avenues, and we were dirt poor. But I got out of this neighborhood. I really think that we all have that opportunity. Moore is interviewing people from the perspective of "You're trapped in having to go to war, because you are poor." I think that is a damaging message. It's wrong.

Ziarno: It is in fact true!

Michael Moore shows a group of inner city kids whose only option for

education and a better life is to enlist in the Army. So, is there plausibility in Moore's general line of argument, that the war is waged on the backs of the working poor?

Ross: It always has been. I served as a workforce analyst for the Federal Reserve, as a volunteer, and what I realized is that the Army has always been a workforce development tool. In my neighborhood, that's where young men went if they couldn't get someone to write them a letter to go to Harvard. There are hundreds of thousands of success stories.

Roth: But it's widely changed since World War II. George Bush Sr. was a war hero and John Kerry was in Vietnam. But that's changing with our generation. If you look at the complexion of the military, literally at the skin color and economic status, it's far less reflective of the overall population than in WW II. When my father went into WW II, everybody went in, no matter whether you were rich or poor. There are far more Latinos and African-Americans and working poor in Iraq than during WW II. I don't think it is a coincidence. Something has happened.

Ross: These people make their choice to go into the Army.

Roth: For economic reasons. In other words, it's not like they are more patriotic than wealthier white Anglo-Saxons. They are not saying, "We believe in this Iraq war, let's go try it." They're saying, as illustrated in the movie, here are benefits, free education and all the things we will hopefully get out of this.

Ross: So really, going into the Army is more like gambling?

Roth: That's right.

Ziarno: I think what Moore is trying to do is compare the dying in the service with people in Congress who don't send their sons and daughters to the military, which is very unique because before they were proud of it. And guess who didn't serve? Vice President Dick Cheney and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. Somebody in the White House would usually be a military hero. Now they're sending poor people into the military, but they themselves have no personal experience at all.

Roth: I think all the soldiers ask of us is that we tell them the truth why we're sending them into war. "Fahrenheit 9/11" touches on this toward the end of the movie. Two big reasons went out of the window, starting with weapons of mass destruction and Saddam's involvement with the Sept. 11 attacks. What do you tell this mother in Flint who lost her son in Iraq? Do you feel the reasons were there for this war?

Ross: Well, I look at what our country did to Germany, and what we did to Japan. We blew them up and turned them into democracies.

When the Bush administration made the case for war in Iraq, it particularly mentioned the liberation of Germany and bringing democracy to Europe after WW II. Do you think this is an accurate analogy?

Ross: I don't think I'm really qualified to go into that discussion. But I do know that there have been wars that have been iffy — that we have waged on not perfect information. But in the case of Germany and Japan, we've turned them into economic juggernauts.

Roth: Did it matter that Japan attacked us, [in our decision] whether or not to attack? It would matter to me. Saddam had nothing to do with Sept. 11! We know that now.

Ross: We've gone to war with people, and they've become democracies at some level. They've gotten the focus off of a war economy, and turned to free-market capitalism.

Ziarno: We didn't fight Japan and Germany to turn them into democracies or economic juggernauts. We did it because they attacked us. We don't have a democracy ourselves. We have a representative republic. Bush using the term of turning Iraq into a democracy is so mind-boggling and idiotic that people can't understand it. Iraq has absolutely no experience with democracy. We won't see this in our lifetime.

Moore suggests that business ties between oil-rich Saudi Arabia and the Bush family resulted in helping Osama bin Laden's family to flee the U.S. after the 9/11 attacks, even though 15 of the 19 terrorists who hijacked planes were Saudi. He claims that the influential Saudi own 4 percent of the U.S. economy.

Ross: Who cares how many other countries own this country? This is the same kind of racism that the Japanese got in the 1980s. They were hated because they were buying blocks of cities, golf courses and neighborhoods. They're investing in our country, and venture capitalists take their money and build our country even larger. It's the best thing that could possibly happen.

Roth: I would agree with you, if these wars would be for the goals that you've said. When we talk about Saudi Arabia owning X amount of the U.S., my problem with that is that they are not a democracy. They are a dictatorship. So if Germany during Hitler started buying up America, I'd go "wow!" My concern is, who is buying and why?

Ziarno: This is all about oil, money and big business. Let's assume I'm wrong, and all the anti-Bush and anti-war people are wrong. Let's assume there will be a democracy in Iraq tomorrow and everything is fine and dandy. What advantage are you going to get from this in the United States?

The only benefit is for global business.

Ross: You keep forgetting that when we get more oil, they get to sell the only real resource they've got!

Ziarno: Who cares if we create more rich people in Iraq? Who gave a shit about Iraq until 9/11? Bush couldn't even find it on the map!

Some critics have called "Fahrenheit 9/11" a work of revolutionary cinema, others have called it a work of political propaganda similar to the films of Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl.

Roth: A propaganda film is produced by a government or perhaps a big multinational corporation controlling a group of people. If Joe makes a movie and I go to see it, no matter what techniques he uses, it wouldn't be propaganda. He's a citizen expressing what he's expressing. It's different if a government does propaganda because they have a whole institution behind them. When Michael Moore goes home tonight, all he has is his movie and a book.

Ziarno: I disagree. Propaganda can be truths or lies. It is trying to convince a group of people that may be large or small to change the way they think. Moore has been doing this for 20 years, and now people are listening to him because the media are finally paying attention to him.

Ross: Moore has an audience bigger than GM. If they have a global press conference, they could not spend enough public relations dollars to have an audience like Moore has. He's got power. That's why I go to his movies. I'm not saying he's right. I'm a student of culture and I want to learn more about it. The last time I saw cheers like that was when I saw "The Color Purple," and everybody including me walked out of the movie crying. You don't see that very much.

Has watching Michael Moore's film changed any of your views?

Ross: I think it put the history of the Middle East on my radar.

Do you trust George W. Bush more or less than before watching this film?

Ross: I came to this discussion as someone who thinks that what makes us better is the economy. I'm a free-market capitalist, and that doesn't mean I vote straight Republican. I vote both ways. I generally don't get involved with politics. The reason why I fell asleep is probably because I don't follow it that closely.

Roth: The film didn't really change my attitudes toward Bush, Cheney and company. But I think it changed my attitudes about Peter Jennings, Dan Rather and Ted Koppel. "Fahrenheit 9/11" reminded me what those network stations are not doing in their 22 minutes of news, including commercials.

Michael Moore wants this film to be remembered as the first big-audience, election-year film that helped unseat a president. Do you think it will have an impact on George W. Bush's popularity?

Ross: No. As a public relations guy I can tell you, I think he cancels himself off. I think he's energizing liberals, but at the same time he is inflaming conservatives. But I do think there's still a benefit to this, because four people have come together tonight to have a conversation that I would have never had otherwise.

Ziarno: Bingo! As I watched the movie I overheard a tall kid saying, "I never voted before, but I'm going to vote now, and I hope people are going to vote against Bush." And a lot of young people are going to see this film.

Roth: As of a week ago, for the first time national polls are showing that a majority of Americans don't like Bush. I think "Fahrenheit 9/11" will be a factor for swing voters who look at this movie, and whereas the war wasn't even an issue for what they were going to vote about before, now it is an issue.

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