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The Least of These

Film not a Michael Moore-style 'gotcha' piece

Old Hodge and I hauled over to Austin Wednesday night — an event in and of itself — to take in a South by Southwest screening of former Georgetown councilman Clark Lyda's first full-length film documentary, *The Least of These*, on T. Don Hutto's role in America's incredibly complex immigration story.

At the Alamo South Lamar we ran into a gang of Georgetown folks — dear old friends of Lyda's like realtor Clare Easley and yet another former councilman, Sam Pfiester, and his wife Rebecca, attorney and former film documentarian Dale Illig, and other interested folks like Will and P.J. Moore, Janet Hewlett, Veta Stratmann, Gordon Baker and oodles of others. It felt like Georgetown



PULLING HAIR

Linda Scarbrough

fall apart come August.

The sold-out audience applauded warmly the film's ending. Other bursts of applause and cheers erupted during the Q&A. The Georgetown group exhaled murmuring words like

short advocacy film.

Unfortunately, ICE representatives refused to talk to Lyda's team (probably, as Old Hodge pointed out, thanks to Michael Moore's combative films). ICE never allowed the film crew to enter or film the facility from the inside, either. Thus, the film probably presented a more lopsided view than Lyda intended.

Even so, "we tried to tell the story in a subtle way," he said.

The main thing Lyda wanted was to understand what happened — why federal policy on families of immigrants not charged with crimes had cumulated in T. Don Hutto.

He spent an "outrageous" amount of his own money and two years on the project, which he originally thought would be a 10-min-

night at the Alamo.

We met the woman who inspired the film, University of Texas law professor Barbara Hines, an expert on immigration law. When the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency decided to utilize a shuttered medium-security prison at Taylor and its for-profit owner, Corporate Corrections of America, to detain families that had fallen afoul of U.S. immigration law, Hines got interested.

Many of the "inmates" at T. Don Hutto — none have been charged with actual crimes — are small children. (Those held at this facility are from countries all over the world except Mexico, most having fled their native lands because they were in danger of being imprisoned for political reasons or because of abusive family situations.)

When ICE finally, after considerable pressure, allowed independent monitors to weigh conditions at T. Don Hutto, it was found that standards for children kept there fell woefully short of Texas's standards for facilities serving children in our state, like schools, day cares, orphanages medical facilities.

In short, for a rather long time, conditions were dreadful.

It was Hines who sought to gain knowledge of those conditions at T. Don Hutto, conditions that were kept secret from public scrutiny. It was she who publicized those conditions, got limited access, and finally achieved a federal court settlement resulting in vast improvements in conditions for families and their children.

She's an impressive lady — dignified, careful, non-judgmental. But as she became more and more aware of the problems at T. Don Hutto — and indeed, with the question of whether our government should ever detain children in prison settings — she became, in her words, obsessed with this issue. She became the main driver toward a much better deal for these unfortunate families, though it could all

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"wonderful," "impressive" and "moving."

Some of it was funny.

One of the memorable lines in the movie came from a Taylor old-timer. "This fellow came up to me and said, 'This looks like a great city. What the hell happened to it?'" The camera then panned Taylor's once magnificent downtown buildings, now largely deserted and in need of repair, while the old-timer explained how things had gone downhill from the days when Taylor was the county's most powerful city.

It was a neat piece of the jigsaw puzzle explaining why Williamson County commissioners continued to support the facility at Taylor, which provided desperately needed jobs in a city that needed them badly.

It is a complex story that Lyda and his team tell in a straightforward narrative that holds one's interest at a high pitch throughout. Excellent work, well worth seeing for anyone with an iota of interest in federal immigration policy and its on-the-ground ramifications.

This was not a "gotcha" documentary, aka Michael Moore. It is an intelligent, thoughtful and lawyerlike piece of work.

"We were determined we were not going to make an advocacy film," Lyda told me last week over a cup of hot tea at the Monument Café, which he co-founded with Rusty Winkstern.

"Our deal was that we were not interested in preaching to the choir."

For one thing, that had already been done in Hutto: *America's Family Prison*, a

ute short. In the end, he found "bureaucratic ineptitude, ignorance and lack of attention instead of evil."

And while conditions for children and families dramatically improved after a Hines-led lawsuit led to a federal court imposed settlement that required close monitoring of T. Don Hutto for two years, that monitoring ends in August.

"We are worried that some of the previous conditions could recur," Lyda said. "It's important that some final resolution be made."

If you missed *The Least of These* but want to see it, do not despair. It is available in three ways: you can watch it free on snagfilms.com; you can order a DVD online at IndiePix; or if you are affiliated with an educational institution such as a law school, an outfit called Cinema Guild is distributing it.

I asked Lyda the question that many of my fellow film-viewers wanted to know, those of us who knew him as an unusually hard-working city councilman who effected enormous advances in the city's ethical code for elected officials and members of appointed boards as well as in pushing through a new unified development code, which most developers appreciate (because it removes confusion) and which has given this city some protection against the sort of unbridled development that has led most suburban hot growth spots to lose their individual grace and identity.

To wit: How on earth did you become a movie producer and director?

"Actually, the producing-directing role has turned out to be just like what I've been doing all my life," he said. "That is, bringing together a group of people who actually know how to do something well and letting them do it."

We sipped the dregs of our tea and he thought a bit.

"I thoroughly enjoyed most of it, and hope to do it again some day."