

9 Queer People in an RV Trying to Stop Mass Shootings



Photo by Jim Eshom

A new film, *Disarm Hate*, artfully chronicles the pain and resolve that followed the Pulse massacre.

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SEPTEMBER 08 2020 8:00 AM EDT



Shock, sadness, and anger — the entire nation was, for several days four years ago, awash in a flood of emotions spilling out from central Florida. There, in Orlando, 49 mostly LGBTQ+ and Latinx people were slain at the Pulse nightclub.

The shooter left a hole in the LGBTQ+ community's collective heart, as well as an unintended awakening among our ranks. After Pulse, more people than ever became aware of the unique ways gun violence impacts LGBTQ+ people.

Filmmaker Julianna Brudek's awakening came after a short, but intense, period of shock and emotion evoked by the horror of Orlando. She felt for a while as if she were paralyzed.

"I felt devastated, like I couldn't move for days," Brudek says. "I was stuck on the couch watching the news. Eventually I looked for some way to take action. But there was almost nothing happening in my area."

Meanwhile, from his home in Connecticut, Jason Hayes was already deep into organizing the Disarm Hate rally, which would take place in a matter of weeks in Washington D.C.

Yearning to connect with other members of the LGBTQ+ community, Brudek soon had a vision for her next film: Nine queer and trans West Coasters traveling in an RV to the nation's capital to join Brudek's gun control rally.

"I have all of these casting files," Brudek, a longtime casting director, recalls. "But in the end, I said, 'Wait a minute, I know the first 10 who I want to offer a place on this journey.' Joey, for instance I knew did the AIDS Ride every year. Donato is a designer, and does all this work for charity, much of which is in the LGBTQ+ community, and Ashlee is an advocate for people who are trans. I inboxed those 10 and eight of them got back to me and wanted to do it."

The cast of what would become Brudek's film, *Disarm Hate*, includes two trans women of color, plus an admirably diverse cast of real-life characters not only engaging and smart, but sometimes tough and frequently funny, while always highly watchable. The diversity of the cast reminds viewers that members of the LGBTQ+ community cross every national boundary, gender, and color line known to humanity.

"That's pretty powerful," Brudek says. "And I think that's why our community can make gun reform happen. We really are everywhere and part of every other community."

Shot in the raw weeks immediately after the mass shooting in Orlando, *Disarm Hate* follows with unflinching honesty the aspirations and fears, the challenges and conflicts, as well as intimate revelations and surprising resolutions that arise with nine powerful personalities crammed

into a recreational vehicle designed to “comfortably accommodate a family of four.”

Real-time events and real-life conversations in the film range from the issuance of a “no-pooing” edict resulting from an incident — let’s just say the overburdened RV’s on-board lavatory did its best — to a moment of group elucidation about the primal nature of fear inherent to transgender women.

“It’s not something you’re going to think about unless you are transgender,” recalls Brudek of the moment she and cast members returned to the RV finding they’d all but abandoned one of their transgender compatriots.

Having arrived overnight in Arkansas at the halfway mark of their sojourn, most of the group had gone out for breakfast, letting one fellow traveler sleep. As they went shopping and exploring the small, notably conservative little hamlet, the cast member awoke and, finding no one else present, knew she’d be staying put lest she risk going out solo in the town’s unfamiliar central corridor.

The film’s drama ramps up as the RV gets closer to the D.C. rally. Having been led on by others, including, Hayes says, a well known gun-reform organization, with promises of corporate support for his event that never materialized, Hayes was excited when Brudek first reached out to him regarding the film. But he was also a little leery.

“I was like, ‘Listen, you can use the Disarm Hate name, but I’m sorry,’” Hayes said. “I cannot finance your film.”

Brudek wasn’t seeking funds, just his blessing and cooperation for filming. Four years on, the two are good friends and allies in shared causes.

Hayes, a celebrity hair stylist and makeup artist, is regularly pulling off Herculean projects outside of his regular career. In 2017, less than a year after the Disarm Hate rally, Hayes helped organize a drag-themed benefit for gun-control groups. He brought a special guest participant: “Cate Blanchett came in drag and she was incredible.”

Meanwhile, some gun-rights extremists insist that massacres like Pulse Orlando are just “the price of freedom.”

“I take that as a challenge and I hope the film will inspire members of our community,” Brudek says.

The universality of human emotion permeates *Disarm Hate*. That’s what captured the attention of award-winning documentary filmmaker Peter Spirer when he saw the film in its final form.

“It was enlightening for me to see LGBTQ people as not monolithic, not always getting along and not necessarily always on the same page,” says Spirer, whose Rugged Entertainment is the now distributing the film, which is streamable at Amazon Prime and other platforms.

As *Disarm Hate* documents, the mass shooting at Pulse was hardly the first time the unfortunately all-American phenomenon of domestic gun terror took innocent lives at an LGBTQ+ establishment. Though it was not the deadliest nor the first, a 2000 attack in Roanoke, Va., was one of the ugliest to befall a queer gathering place in recent memory.

Just one among an array of meaningful waypoints — there’s also a stop at a shooting range and a meet-up with the founder of the Pittsburgh chapter of Pink Pistols, an LGBTQ+ gun-safety group — the film’s stop in Roanoke shines a bright light on how reservoirs of hate can break with fatal results.

The RV delivers the cast to meet Deanna Marcin of Roanoke’s Backstreet Café. She works behind the establishment's lunch counter-style bar, and is clearly in love with the business, its customers, and the Roanoke community.

Marcin confirms what one castmember has accurately deduced: that Backstreet is a rare resource for a neglected LGBTQ+ clientele in this conservative part of the country. In fact, Marcin (who is a transgender woman) points out that just a few miles away is Lynchburg, Va., where in 1971, the late, notoriously homophobic televangelist Jerry Falwell co-founded Liberty University.

“Forty-five minutes east of us is Lynchburg, the beginning of the Bible Belt,” Marcin explains to an intently listening Donato Crowley and his fellow *Disarm Hate* castmember, William Christopher Bland. Bland nods as Marcin further explains that the man who injured six and killed her former lover and late friend, Danny Overstreet, found his victims in the same place they now sit enjoying one another’s company.

“He was frustrated and sick of his last name being ridiculed for his whole life; and decided he was going to come downtown and, in his words, ‘go find faggots and go shoot queers.’ He actually came downtown. There was the doorman at Corned Beef down the street, who he tells, ‘I want to go shoot some faggots.’ The doorman tells him about the [nearby gay-cruising] park. On the way to the park, he stops in here to buy a beer, realizes what kind of bar it is and opens fire.

The shooter’s last name and the reason he claimed for his anti-queer “frustration?” It was “Gay.”

Hayes’s friend and client, Emmy-winning actress Carol Kane, was already a supporter of the gun-reform work Hayes has done since launching the Disarm Hate movement. The *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Hunters* actress is also a fan of Brudek’s documentary film. Her 94-year-old mother joined Kane in watching the film recently and declared, “It’s a pilgrimage.”

“Get rid of the guns!” Kane exclaims. “It’s too much. But these young people demanding change, and directors like the one who put this film together, will be what save us from extremists and guns and all this violence.”

TAGS: FILM, VIOLENCE, THE PULSE SHOOTING, ARCHIVE: THE PULSE SHOOTING, CRIME, FLORIDA