



Trigger happy

Locally produced documentary looks at real issues behind America's gun culture

The year 2012 was terrible for mass shootings. First, there was the killing of 12 people in an Aurora, Colo., movie theater. That

by
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Production notes: For info on the film, including future screenings info, visit americantotem.org

phone interview. The local activist, talk-radio host ("The Real Issue" on KZFR 90.1 FM) and Chico State professor felt she had to do something in response, so she decided to make a documentary film about guns and gun violence—never mind that she had no idea how to do so.

She can laugh about her inexperience now that her film, *American Totem*, is playing to appreciative audiences, as it did last Sunday (May 19) to a sold-out Pageant Theatre. "I went to film school making this film," she said, chuckling.

American Totem is not the film she set out to make. Her initial goal was to add to the push for meaningful gun control, especially of the assault rifles often used in mass

shootings. As the movie's website states, however, "What she found was not what she expected."

We usually think of the gun problem as a binary clash between pro-gun and anti-gun groups, but, as Hilderbrand discovered, it's not that simple. Gradually, as she and her team traveled the country and talked with people who represented a wide range of attitudes toward guns, she came to realize that "both sides made sense." Focusing on guns was a distraction, she realized. The real issue wasn't guns, but rather the underlying forces fostering the gun culture.

She learned that, in a society in which feelings of community have weakened, guns offer a substitute community. One such group is the A Girl & A Gun Women's Shooting League in Austin, Texas. For these women, target shooting is a fun sport, and learning how to shoot is empowering. They identify as a sisterhood of adept gun lovers. After shooting together, they like to retire to a local restaurant for margaritas.

At the other end of the gun-community spectrum is the Huey P. Newton Gun Club in Dallas. Named after the founder of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, these are black men who arm themselves and their neighborhoods for protection from police violence, much as the Black Panthers did in the 1960s and '70s.

These groups are different from each other, but they have something important in common: a desire for community and camaraderie. They're not finding it in the larger society, so they're creating their own societies built around shooting guns.

The greatest problem, the film suggests, is the sheer quantity of handguns. Death by assault rifle is rare; death by handgun is comparatively common. This is especially true when it comes to suicide. Nearly three-fourths of handgun deaths are suicides.

Another common cause of handgun deaths is domestic violence—spouses killing spouses, parents killing children, often under the influence of alcohol.

In addition to providing an excellent data-driven analysis of gun violence in the United States, *American Totem* also offers a visually rich look at the ways Hollywood and the gun industry have inculcated a narrative that romanticizes gun use and killing by the "good guys" (the Lone Ranger, etc.).

This is a movie that deserves a wider audience, if only because it is so thought provoking without being biased. Right now Hilderbrand is offering it to anyone who wants to organize a screening and is trying to enter it into film competitions. Let's hope she succeeds. □

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