

Press Release: Waking Up French - Réveil: A Documentary Film on the Repression and Renaissance of the French of New England. It's an epic story of New England's largest minority, why they came and what happened to them.

Starting with two French families, one in Lewiston, Me and the other in St. Georges, Quebec that Levine has been filming for twenty-four years beginning in 1979, the film explores why the French were an anomaly to "melting pot" America. They kept their language and culture long after most others had lost the heritage connection. So why they are losing it now speaks to the same situation of a new generation of immigrants and whether they will suffer the same fate too.

With 30-40 % of Maine's population of French -American; it's estimated that today, in New England, there are more than 2,000,000 descendants of the one million who came from Quebec and New Brunswick at the turn of the century. As many as 500,000 people still speak French with an equal number who lost it growing up or later.

Educators once regarded heritage language retention and bi-lingualism as a detriment. But Research Sociologist, Sandra Kouritzin, author of "Facets of Language Loss", shows that loss of a heritage language at any age means disconnecting from a deep part of yourself that can not be translated into another language. It's a "soul loss that gravely affects the individual's emotional and intellectual development for the rest of their life." According to Yvon Labbe of the Franco-American Center, "[language loss on such a scale] leads to a sense of powerlessness, shame, and eventually to a whole culture becoming invisible."

Why a million New England French speakers living a short ride from seven million of their French Canadian brethren suddenly lost their language is a central question of the film. One of the most dramatic sequences traces the story of the Ku Klux Klan in New England. By 1924 the KKK had elected a governor in Maine and had more member than Mississippi or any other Southern state. That same year 20,000 Portlanders marched in a parade in support of the KKK. Levine has found actual footage of the KKK in Maine to explore who brought them here and their role in the suppression of the French culture.

Five years in the making, the documentary has a unique structure which Levine calls an "analytical documentary". "It is trying to describe and account for the "emotional history of a people, looking for examples of cultural and personal emergence that can lead the culture to a renaissance." It integrates all kinds of research. From the field of neurolinguistics scientists now see a first language as hard wired in the brain, asleep perhaps, but not forgotten so a heritage language actually can't be "lost" .

Following this theme, the film explores a number of people in New England who have successfully "awakened" their "lost French". In Waterville a whole group of people have successfully reacquired their French in a pilot project for French Reacquisition. In Woonsocket RI, French Canadian and Senegalese families may be defining the New

England of the future. And in Maine's St. John Valley, young people in towns like Madawaska are bi-lingual, speaking French in public as a natural part of their lives.

After each showing, Levine personally facilitates an in depth audience discussion which is also filmed and sometimes itself becomes part of the ongoing film making process of exploring a culture in transition.

According to Labbe: "The film is a powerful and long overdue portrait of a people fighting for a basic right to be who they are." Audience reactions from Francos and Anglos alike seem to bear out Labbe's feeling: " a realistic view of what growing up French Canadian was like"; " It was quite emotional for me and my wife...captured the essence of what we have become" ; " could feel the pain of young people who couldn't speak the same language as their grandparents"; "had no idea of the power that the hate of the KKK had in Maine to silence the French tongue and that reminded me of the Somali situation now in Lewiston"; "When I was a little girl my parents wouldn't let me play with the Protestant kids. Now I understand they were trying to protect me." ; " most meaningful was how the teenagers in the audience responded so strongly to their own history which they had never known.:

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