

NEW ENGLAND'S LARGEST GAY & LESBIAN NEWSPAPER



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**Despite victories, battles still rage on many fronts  
In new DVD collection, filmmaker Arthur Dong documents the war  
against homosexuality**

*By R.J. Grubb*

In the wake of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's historic decision last week, the sound of gay wedding bells struck deep chords throughout America. But the battle, as one filmmaker documents, is far from over.

Collecting the historic work of award-winning filmmaker Arthur Dong, Deep Focus Productions recently released a three-DVD set called "Stories from the War on Homosexuality: The Arthur Dong Collection, Volume 1." Be warned: If you want to stay festive following last week's ruling, then the films - a series of wrenching documentaries about American society's antipathy toward gays and lesbians - may present a bit of a buzzkill. But if you're looking to be galvanized by the injustices committed against gays and lesbians, then the collection delivers a definitive series that powerfully illustrates three fronts where gay rights struggles continue to be waged: the military, religion, and the family.

Included in the DVD set are "Family Fundamentals", a timely portrait of American fundamentalism; "Licensed to Kill", a brutal examination of violence against gay men; and "Coming Out Under Fire," a well-researched look at the origins of today's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" controversy in the U.S. military, which traces the tacit policy back to World War II, when military personnel used a "gag reflex and fellatio test" to detect gay servicemen and women. In all, the new DVD collection comes loaded with added and extended scenes, interviews with Dong, and articles by Advocate reporter Chris Bull that provide a rich cultural context for each film.

While watching Dong's collection last week, it appeared to arrive with perfect timing. What better way to understand the landmark Massachusetts SJC decision - and the swell of reaction among conservative leaders - than to take a step back in time? Of course, in Dong's case, his documentaries capture very real and very present images of America. So much so that as the fight for same-sex marriage prepares for its next stage on Beacon Hill, the collection offers great insight into how to confront and diffuse a fired up right.

Primarily, the strength of Dong's films are how they render public and often abstract debates regarding gay issues in human terms. For instance, Dong masterfully exploits human drama when he hits home in "Family Fundamentals." A compelling look at three religious families, the film focuses on parents who believe that their gay kids represent, as Dong narrates, "the end of the human race." To film "Fundamentals," Dong cut his crew loose and became a one-man

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band. Armed with only a digital camera, Dong talked with parents - a Pentecostal church leader, devout Mormons, and a Roman Catholic Congressman - who actively oppose homosexuality, despite having gay children. Doing so, Dong captures a nonstop series of personal narratives that combine to create a moving record of gay American family life.

Dong filmed "Family Fundamentals" after he finished his nightmarish documentary, "Licensed to Kill" where he interviewed murderers of gay men to talk about what led them to their crimes. (While a student in San Francisco, Dong was a victim of a hate crime that he narrowly escaped by jumping onto the hood of a passing car.) In "Kill," Dong learned that most murderers casually blamed their slayings on their Christian backgrounds and how they were raised. Shaped by church leaders and strict Roman Catholic parents, these murderers sparked a hatred for homosexuality in their childhood that would result in devastating, gruesome consequences of men preying upon gay men. One segment shows how a U.S. soldier, upset about President Clinton's possible lifting of the gay ban in the military, randomly shot and killed four diners during a murderous rampage at a Luigi's restaurant. Another shows how a convict justified his slow tortuous slaying of a 29-year-old gay man by saying, "homosexuals are weak." All the while, Dong intersperses the raw interviews with police footage and horrific images of the crime scenes.

While inexplicable physical depravity takes center stage in "Licensed to Kill," the psychological damage done in "Family Fundamentals" is equally inexplicable. Here, sons and daughters who are rejected by their parents must learn how to cope with a parental love that comes with conditions. To demonstrate how numerous these difficult family situations are, Dong opens "Family Fundamentals" by naming various public officials who reject their gay children from ex-Senator Pete Knight to deceased Congressman Sonny Bono to alive and well Vice President Dick Cheney.

Yet, besides making political connections, "Family Fundamentals" ultimately provides a deeply private snapshot of the culture wars being waged at kitchen tables and living rooms across America. Like "Licensed to Kill" and "Coming Out Under Fire," Dong doesn't offer any easy answers when it comes to religious parents and gay kids. Instead, he asks many difficult questions. But embedded in those questions are clues to a better and brighter future.

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