

Warren woman exposes Church cover-up on film

By Alyssa Kneller
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WARREN- After refinancing her house to free up funds, and spending five years conducting research and interviews, Warren resident Mary Healey-Conlon has at long last completed her documentary, "Holy Water-Gate: Abuse Cover-Up in the Catholic Church." The hour-long film will debut for the general public at the Coolidge Corner Movie Theater in Brookline, Mass., on Monday, Jan. 10, at 7:30 p.m.

Because she is a Roman Catholic, her work is not finished, said Ms. Healey-Conlon. She is only just beginning the painful process of reconciling her discoveries with past assumptions about faith and the Church.

Years before investigative journalists at The Boston Globe propelled the problem of sexual abuse by priests into the national spotlight, Ms. Healey-Conlon was working with a team of Rhode Island attorneys who believed the Diocese of Providence had knowingly moved priests who had committed acts of sexual abuse against minors from parish to parish. As a legal assistant, she met abuse victims who had been pursuing cases against the Catholic church for years. She even learned she knew one of the accused priests whom her grandfather had served alongside as a deacon years before. Fearing lawyers for the church might stall forever, she resolved to document victims' stories. In 1999, she picked up a video camera and began filming.

"It's not like I started out with a specific vision of what the film would be," said Ms. Healey-Conlon, who has a master's degree in television production from Emerson College. "I started out wanting to document the stories of some Rhode Island survivors."

Probe pointed to cover-up

The project slowly evolved as she accumulated information that pointed to a church cover-up. She probed deeper, interviewing clergy and high-level church officials in search of answers. The completed film paints a portrait of church leaders as a group determined to protect institutional power at all costs, she said.

In her investigation, she learned that bishops moved priests accused of molesting children to new parishes, where they continued to prey on boys and girls. For example, Father William C., a priest in Illinois, was transferred to six different parishes after he raped two adolescent boys in Oak Forest. His last assignment was as a youth minister.

"The film focuses on the methods and mechanisms that the church used to conceal the abuse for decades," said Ms. Healey-Conlon.

The documentary also presents a pattern of priests building trust and then betraying parishioners. Pedophile priests often targeted children who belonged to families that were the backbone of the church.

Over a period of months, or years, an errant priest would befriend a family and establish a foundation of trust. Then, he would select a child and slowly normalize inappropriate behavior, she said.

For instance, in the film, Father John Bambrick, of New Jersey, describes how he was molested by his parish priest when he served as an altar boy. The priest built a strong relationship with Father Bambrick's family before finding excuses to spend time alone with him. One day, as they watched a movie together, the priest took his hand. Father Bambrick said he was shocked. After the movie, the priest said they

should practice holding hands which would make the youngster more comfortable. Gradually, hand-holding progressed, but Father Bambrick was afraid to speak of the abuse.

"The most tragic part of this is that victim survivors have suffered in isolation and have experienced a lot of backlash," explained Ms. Healey-Conlon.

In the film, Father Bambrick describes the guilt he felt for keeping silent. However, even when victims reported the abuse to church leaders, they seldom received support or satisfaction. Church officials listened to their stories, then failed to take action. Few clergymen were defrocked, though many were moved to different parishes. When the church did settle, victims were often asked to sign confidentiality agreements banning them from discussing their experiences.

Breaking the silence

In the film, Ms. Healey-Conlon shows how some victims are finally breaking the silence. Despite his promise to keep quiet, Mark Serrano, who was abused at a young age, told his story in a letter published by The New York Times. After years of struggling alone, he began to receive phone calls from others who had been abused by the same priest.

Because it is Mr. Serrano's belief that healing cannot occur without openness, survivors now are asking church leaders to replace gag orders with dialogue and intimidation with compassion. The victims Ms. Healey-Conlon spoke with also wanted the church to work harder to protect children by releasing names of accused priests and ceasing the practice of shuffling alleged perpetrators between parishes.

According to the Diocese of Providence website, 49 diocesan priests in Rhode Island were accused of sexual abuse of a minor from 1950 to June, 2002.

"None of the priests is serving in ministry today," states the site. But the priests remain nameless. The John Jay Survey, commissioned by the U.S. bishops' National Review Board, provides similar data — without names. Ms. Healey-Conlon said it is her opinion that figures presented in that survey are probably low because it documents "known" claims of sexual abuse.

The shroud of secrecy and mistreatment of survivors is pushing many Catholics to question their faith, she said. For example, after working on the documentary, her mother now attends an Episcopal church.

"How can you possibly recover from a profound loss and betrayal of that which was the center of your life, and perhaps most importantly, your spiritual and community life?" said Ms. Healey-Conlon, who last week received the CINE Golden Eagle Award for excellence in professional film-making,

She is in excellent company. Past winners include Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Barbara Kopple, and Charles Guggenheim.

Holy Water-Gate will be shown in Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark and other countries. At the Boston premiere on Jan. 10, counselors will be available to help viewers sort through their feelings and process the powerful film. Ms. Healey-Conlon hopes to hold a screening in Providence soon.

What: "Holy Water-Gate: Abuse Cover-Up in the Catholic Church"

Where: Coolidge Corner Movie Theater, 290 Harvard St., Brookline, Mass.

When: Jan. 10 at 7:30 p.m.

Admission: \$6; to purchase tickets in advance, visit <www.coolidge.org>