

Showing faith in his family Filmmaker is home to share personal story in 'Hand of God'

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By James Sullivan, Globe Correspondent | June 6, 2006

SALEM -- Dropcloths cover the furniture on the first floor of the Cultrera home. Aunt Kay, who lived below her sister Josephine's family for decades, died recently at age 100. The house is getting a face lift; Josephine, 86, and her husband, Paul, 91, will move down from the second floor when the paint dries.

The halls used to be covered with Catholic images, but they're all gone now, packed away with the rest of Aunt Kay's effects. Although Paul and Josephine still attend Mass as always, they can live without the constant reminders. In recent years they've come to terms with the revelation that their oldest son, also named Paul, was a victim of repeated sexual abuse when he was an altar boy at St. James Church, at the hands of a local priest, Joseph Birmingham, who died in 1989.

Thanks to the Cultreras' second son, a filmmaker named Joe, the family is working through Paul's recovery together. This week Joe will present his new documentary for the first time in his hometown. "Hand of God," which screens at 7 p.m. Thursday at Cinema Salem and 6 p.m. Saturday at AMC/ Loews Boston (as part of the Boston International Film Festival), is a frank examination of Paul and his arduous journey.

The film, says Joe, is about his brother and the long-held secret. But it is also "about creating dialogue with family. We felt horrible, but we didn't sit and talk deeply about it."

The filmmaker shot footage of his parents in the kitchen where he now sits -- the same magnets on the fridge, the same teddy bear sitting atop the microwave. He also traveled to Sacramento, where his brother has lived for several years. "Even though Paul doesn't talk directly to my parents in the film, it's like they did," Joe says. "When my father says, 'I can't believe what they did to my son' -- that completely floored [Paul]."

Made independently over three years, in between Joe's gigs as a freelance editor in New York, the film was almost as stressful for Joe as it was for Paul. A few weeks ago, after logging late nights trying to get "Hand of God" into festivals, Joe took himself to the hospital with stabbing pains in his shoulder and back. It turned out to be inflammation, but the nurses were initially convinced he was having a heart attack. "They all started panicking," he recalls.

Joe Cultrera, a wiry 47-year-old with a sharp sense of humor and more hair on his chin than his head, has been anxious about the film's reception in Boston. "Hand of God" had its world premiere in February at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival in Montana; more recently, it won awards at festivals in Ashland, Ore., and Tupelo, Miss.

"I knew if I took it far away, people would be more objective," he says.

Joe remembers being a teenager and going into Boston to visit his big brother, who would take him to the art-house cinemas.

"I'm probably in the business because of him," Joe says. "Fellini, Orson Welles -- it was almost like he was leading me to this, in some unconscious way."

Paul, who manages a food co-op in Sacramento, says he once considered writing a memoir about his experience. But after confronting the archdiocese of Boston in the early 1990s, and ultimately accepting a \$60,000 settlement after bitter negotiations, he no longer had the energy for it.

"I was flattened," he said last week on the phone from California. "I didn't want to think about it anymore."

In 2002, when the church sex-abuse scandal became public, Paul and his brother had to convince their parents that going public was the right thing to do.

Paul, now 56, recalls telling his father, "Look, the church was able to count on everyone reacting just the way you are -- total shame and embarrassment. People are going to support you. You didn't do anything wrong."

At one point, Paul says, he joked that his brother should make a film out of the ordeal. Joe began taking the idea

seriously after shooting footage of the closing of St. Mary's Italian Church , the family's neighborhood parish, in January 2003 .

``Everyone in these houses," says Joe, lifting a hand toward the window, ``literally bought the land and built the place. To have that taken away was such a deep blow."

Joe calls his documentary a ``memory film." It opens with an affectionate family portrait, emphasizing the huge role of the church in the Cultreras' lives. Later, after Paul has told his family about the abuse, Joe catches devout Aunt Kay on camera, angrily tearing up a photo of then-Cardinal Bernard Law.

``I thought the heavens were going to open up," Paul says now.

As the film ends, Joe has begun confronting members of the church and its administration. In one of several astonishing scenes, Bishop Richard Lennon refuses to let the filmmaker shoot video outside the chancery in Brighton and calls Joe ``a sad little man."

Since completing the film, Joe has been relentless in his efforts to get members of the church -- especially John B. McCormack, Law's former point man on the sexual abuse allegations and the current bishop of the Diocese of Manchester, N.H. -- to come to screenings.

``He's having his Michael Moore moments now off-camera," Paul says with a chuckle. ■