



The 'pure experience': Filmmaker documents brother's story to expose Catholic Church's 'blind faith upbringing'

By Gail McCarthy , Staff writer
Gloucester Daily Times

Editor's note: Gail McCarthy, the Times' arts & entertainment reporter, caught up this week with filmmaker Joe Cultrera and his brother, Paul, the subject of his award-winning film about a priest who sexually abused children. Paul Cultrera, a former Gloucester resident, was abused as a boy by The Rev. Joseph Birmingham at St. James Parish in Salem. Birmingham was also a pastor at St. Ann's Church in Gloucester. The film, the "Hand of God," will be aired Thursday night at the Gloucester Cinema (6:30). Both brothers will attend the screening and take part in audience discussion. The screening serves as a benefit for the local arts group, the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, or seARTS.

Joe Cultrera: 'I can get my God elsewhere'

McCarthy: What was the catalyst for making the film and your desire to create this documentary?

Joe Cultrera: The initial catalyst was watching other media treatments of the clergy abuse crisis and feeling they were all missing the point of origin. They never bothered to look at how we were sucked into the Catholic system from the get-go, how we were watched over by the eyes of those saints and bleeding hearts that lined the walls of our homes and that followed us wherever we went. We were taught fear, shame and embarrassment.

It was those elements of our blind faith upbringing that allowed abuse to happen and go undetected, unspoken about for decades. My brother made me realize that the Catholic Church taught us all these things - in part - as a way of protecting itself. I wanted to make a film from the inside that dug under the fingernails of the situation and walked the viewer step by step through it. A film that was not afraid to criticize the very core of the situation, but that would do so in a very quiet, undramatic way - by simply showing what one survivor and his family went through. The film is pure experience, not gussied up with dramatic music and re-creations.

McCarthy: What was the most difficult part of the filming?

Joe Cultrera: Sitting down and asking questions of my brother, parents and sister that I did not really want to ask was very difficult and scary. Like most families, we do not sit around and have these sorts of deep discussions. They are not comfortable. But if there is anything I have learned from this process it is not to be afraid to talk or to confront your fears. The film created a dialogue and an understanding within our family that was not previously there. We are stronger because of it.

McCarthy: What connection does the film/filmmaker have to Gloucester?

Joe Cultrera: My brother Paul lived in Gloucester from the mid-70's until the breakup of his marriage in the early 90's. He ran the Gloucester Food Co-op. He is still very connected to the town and its people. He has lots of friends there. I worked in Gloucester with local filmmaker Henry Ferrini for a couple years after graduating from film school. Henry and I sort of grew up in the business together and share a way of framing things. Henry shot all the Gloucester footage in the film and supplied invaluable stock footage.

Back in 1976 when I was first playing around with making movies I created some crazy Super-8 films that were screened at various places in Gloucester. The spirit and support of that town pushed me forward with my decision to head to New York, study film and destroy any sense of normalcy I might have had in my life. I am eternally grateful to the spirits of Gloucester.

McCarthy: How has the film and its release affected your life?

Joe Cultrera: I've never lived a more spiritual existence than I have this year. Taking this film from city to city, encountering people and creating dialogue with them, has been like some new type of church. I feel like a missionary man who is trying to dig down to some true sense of God. Making this film and being at screenings has taught me that God is not something you need a priest or a corporate entity to access. It is there in dialogue with your family and within the community you create every day.

McCarthy: Is there humor and warmth infused into what is otherwise a heart-rendering tale?

Joe Cultrera: It's a film about family. My family has a good sense of humor - especially my brother. No matter what this church has dumped on him and us, they cannot steal our smiles. I am incapable of making a film that doesn't have some sense of humor about itself. Whenever bad stuff happens to us, laughter, wisecracks and my mother's smile have always been there to even things out. When I first showed the film to Paul his initial reaction was, "Well that's the funniest film about sexual abuse I've ever seen."

McCarthy: Did your family's Italian heritage and culture influence the film?

Joe Cultrera: I tried to create the detail of our upbringing as a foundation to build the film upon. In creating that specific detail I figured a lot of people from other backgrounds would find some sort of recognition, even if they weren't specifically Italian.

Growing up in the Italian neighborhood of Salem things were always Italian and Catholic. I never saw a separation. I see it now and understand that I can be one without the other. It's taken me a long time to figure that out because I think the Catholic Church has wormed its way into ethnic groups to the point where we came to believe that Catholicism was our cultural identity. We got protective of it. We didn't want to think outside of it. We didn't want to question or criticize because it felt like some sort of betrayal of where we came from - of our ancestors. I now understand that being Italian-American is my cultural identity, but Catholicism is just a corporate product I was sold. I can get my God elsewhere.

Paul Cultrera: Film helps bring family together

McCarthy: What was the catalyst for making the film and your desire to be a part of this documentary?

Paul Cultrera: The catalyst was Joe saying he wanted to do it, and I trust my brother. He's good at whatever he does.

McCarthy: What was the most difficult part of the filming?

Paul Cultrera: The hardest part was thinking about what effect the film would have on my life, the fear of how people would react to me. People who I work with or who I have known for years and know nothing about it are now finding out. I have lifelong friends who don't know and find out through film or the newspaper. ... But similarly to when I told my ex-wife about it, her reaction and that of others was supportive, and the overall reaction to the film is supportive. No one walks out in disgust or throws things at you. They appreciate the intent of it.

McCarthy: What connection do you have to Gloucester?

Paul Cultrera: My mother went into labor when she was at the Fourth of July fireworks celebrated in Gloucester, and she went back to Salem. I was born on July 5. I moved to Gloucester 26 years later, and I thought I was coming home. I just love Gloucester and Cape Ann. It feels oddly like home to me although I've been away for 15 odd years. If they could change the weather I'd still be there. I think about Gloucester all the time, and I'd love to live there, and then I think of those mornings when you have to shovel the snow just to get out of your driveway and then you return home and you have to shovel to get in after the snowplows. (Paul, now 57, lives in California).

McCarthy: How has the film and its release affected your life?

Paul Cultrera: People I have known are now finding out about it, and it has opened up different conversations with them, and I get more calls from newspapers than I ever had before in my life. It has changed my relationship to my family. Joe and I have always been close, and it's created more closeness. My brother is nine years younger. He was born on Thanksgiving. He was the first Thanksgiving baby born in Salem and that was as newsworthy as the big Salem-Beverly football game.

But he was able to ask the tough questions, and I have a much more immense respect for what he does and how he took all these pieces and put it together in a story. He's an amazing editor. With my parents and sister, I think the film has opened up a space that wasn't there before. It helped to start some conversations with all of us about what happened and how we dealt or didn't deal with this.

McCarthy: What about the humor and warmth in the film?

Paul Cultrera: My brother is incapable of making a film without humor. Our family is incapable of having a life without humor. I don't even know where this sense of humor comes from, but it probably helped get me through this. I am still able to laugh, especially when I see the Pope and bishops dressed up.

McCarthy: Did your family's Italian heritage and culture influence the film?

Paul Cultrera: One of the things that spurred Joe on was when my parent's local parish closed down; it was to be sold off and pay off debts to survivors of Joe Birmingham. That pushed Joe over the edge, and he saw that here's the story of how it's affected my mother and father, who are devout Catholics. Their parish church was everything to them, and now it's being taken away. My grandparents came over from Italy in the early

20th century, and we grew up in this tight-knit Italian neighborhood. So being Italian wasn't having a lot of vowels in your name. It was part of us.

In my fantasy world, I live in Rome. I love Italy. I went when I was 23 and spent four months with relatives in Sicily, and I wanted to get back there for the rest of my life. I go there about once a year, to Canicattini Bagni, near Siracusa in Sicily. I probably felt so comfortable in Gloucester because I heard a lot of Sicilian dialects like my grandmother had.

Joe went to Sicily and took footage there, and it's in the film. A lot of the film is about my relationship with my father and how it was harmed and how Father Birmingham took that role, and I wasn't able to tell my father or allow him to protect me. My father had a distant father. There just a lot of father stuff going on.

Seeing seARTS" is an occasional Times feature highlights the work of seARTS members or those who participate in seARTS events. The Society for the Encouragement of the Arts is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to re-establish Cape Ann as a world-class center for working artists in balance with the unique character of Cape Ann as a maritime community.

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