



Award-winning documentary about clergy abuse at Gloucester Cinema next week

By Gail McCarthy , Staff writer
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—
Paul Cultrera lived with a secret for decades.

The Salem native moved to Gloucester as a young man and he ran the Cape Ann Food Cooperative, a place residents frequented for nourishing foods.

As a young teenager, he and his family attended St. James Parish in Salem, where the late Joseph Birmingham served as a priest, one eventually accused of sexual abuse of boys in several parishes, including Salem and Gloucester.

Cultrera stands among the dozens of victims.

But the process of revealing his story began on Gloucester's Main Street one evening after dinner about 15 years ago while he was having a conversation with his ex-wife, Hartley Ferguson, a local artist and language teacher. The two were sitting in a car outside the restaurant.

"I told her," Cultrera said. "It was the first time I had uttered anything about it. I was surprised I answered her honestly. But I'm glad she asked because I began to open up."

His younger brother, Joe Cultrera, a filmmaker, asked if he could create a film about his brother's ordeal. The result was "Hand of God," a documentary, which has won numerous awards, on how the clergy sex abuse scandal affected one family.

"I trusted him," Paul Cultrera said about his brother. "Everyone has a story, but not everybody has a brother who can tell the story well. But it's really a story about my family. I know my story, but my mother and father and sister and brother are also active participants. Watching the film, I can see how it has affected them. I'm glad Joe did it. It's an important story."

That story will make its debut in Gloucester on Thursday night at the Gloucester Cinema to benefit the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts. On Jan. 16, the PBS program "Frontline" will also feature the film.

In a telephone interview from California this week, Cultrera agreed that if he had still been married, he might not have told Ferguson. But as their relationship changed, he confided in her.

When contacted yesterday, Ferguson said it is a wonderful movie and encouraged people to see it.

Joe Cultrera viewed his older brother as a different sort of survivor of clergy abuse than those victims the media tended to showcase.

"Paul has survived with his humor and spirit intact," said the younger Cultrera. "I thought he would be effective at telling this story in a way that was engaging rather than depressing."

The filmmaker, now based in New York City, said the shooting began when his parents faced the closing of their neighborhood church. He and his co-producers went to Salem to shoot a short film of the last Mass as a gift for the parishioners. Joe Cultrera wanted to preserve on celluloid the inside of the church, which contained so many memories for its parishioners.

It was then he said that he envisioned "the whole arc of a story - from my brother's abuse to the abuse of my parents. It was clear to me that this religious corporation put its pride - and its business survival - ahead of its mission of compassion and soul saving."

He was referring to the need for the Archdiocese of Boston to raise money through selling its property to pay in part for a multimillion-dollar legal settlement stemming from clergy abuse.

Cape Ann also lost churches in a reconfiguration of the parishes here, which occurred in the wake of the growing list of victims and lawsuits, as well as a dwindling number of priests.

Both brothers noted that Birmingham served as pastor of Gloucester's St. Ann Church in the mid-1980s, in his fifth assignment.

"Ironically, Paul was living a couple blocks away from St. Ann's while Birmingham was stationed there. He never knew his abuser was living down the street from him until after he first spoke of his abuse and we started investigating Birmingham's trail," Joe Cultrera said.

Paul Cultrera first lived in Fort Square and later moved to Myrtle Square when Birmingham was pastor here.

"We were neighbors and I didn't know it," he said. "If I had, I don't know what I would have done. I was trying to keep it a secret."

But no such secret remains as the Cultrera story and film continue to be screened around the country, winning many audience favorites and other awards at local film festivals.

"The way I look at it, everyone has something that happens in their life," said Paul Cultrera, now 57. "Everyone who reaches adulthood has some loss or tragedy and I'm lucky I have a brother who is skillful that can make it a story. People see different things in this film. For me, this film helps me see how not talking has affected my life."

Cultrera now lives on the West Coast and works as general manager for the Sacramento food cooperative.

Many of his Gloucester friends have seen the film and walked away touched by the experience.

"The important thing about this film is the warmth in it and how courageous the whole family is and how they kept their humor," said Jo-Ann Castano, a sculptor and a founder of the Society for the Encouragement

of the Arts. "They supported their brother and son. It's heartwarming to see a family sticking together."

Local author Peter Anastas, who knows both brothers, went to Salem to see the film earlier in the year.

Paul Cultrera, who attended the screening, said he had expected about 15 people to show up.

Anastas, who applauded the film, found a packed theater and people waiting to get in.

"The film is dealing with a subject that is so important to the lives of people, whether Roman Catholic or not," Anastas said. "It's a film that's really about secrets, its hidden pain and trauma. Even though it's about someone abused by a priest, I think the story is one about how you deal with any kind of trauma. There have been pieces about the victims of the pedophiles, but I have never seen one so complete, so powerful and so moving."

Reader box:

What: The screening of Joe Cultrera's award-winning documentary, "Hand of God"

When: Thursday, Dec. 14, at 6:30 p.m.

Where: The Gloucester Cinema at 74 Essex Ave. (Route 133) in Gloucester

This is a benefit for the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts.

Director Joe Cultrera and his brother, Paul Cultrera, on whom the film is based, will be present for a question and answer session following the screening. Tickets available online at www.searts.org/programs.html; at the Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce, or at the door. For more information, visit www.handofgodfilm.com.

PBS's Frontline has picked up "Hand of God" to be shown Jan. 16, 2007.

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