

Priest abuse film draws huge crowd

Former Salem man's tale 'hit nail on head'

By TOM DALTON
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SALEM — Joe Cultrera was a little nervous yesterday before the New England premiere of his documentary about the sexual abuse of his older brother Paul by a Salem priest.

The New York director's film had been shown at festivals in Montana, Arizona, Oregon, California and other states and had won awards. But last night was different.

Last night, "Hand of God" came home to Salem, home to the city where the late Rev. Joseph Birmingham abused dozens of boys — including Paul Cultrera — in St. James Parish in the late 1960s. This wasn't an audience of documentary filmgoers. This was parishioners from St. James, families who knew his family and even a victim of the infamous priest.

The Cultrera brothers, who both flew in for the premiere, didn't have to wait long for the crowd's reaction. They lined up early for tickets, filled CinemaSalem to overflowing, gasped



KRISTEN OLSON/Staff photo.

Joe Cultrera, a former Salem resident now living in Queens, N.Y., films at the opening of his documentary "The Hand of God" at CinemaSalem while his brother Paul, visiting from Sacramento, Calif., greets many old friends who came to support the film last night.

and even laughed during the showing and burst into applause when it was over.

"Incredible," said Pattie Condon, who had gone to St. James Grammar School with many of the victims, as she left the theater. "It hit the nail on the head."

"It tore my heart out," Lorraine Leonard of Salem said.

If last night was any test, "Hand of God" reached a large and diverse audience with a story that was, at different times, gut-wrenching, laugh-out-

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loud funny and heartbreaking.

It was a story told largely by Paul Cultrera, a food cooperative manager from California, of his abuse as an altar boy at St. James. A conversation during Confession led to "counseling" sessions in the rectory and months of abuse in a bedroom, car and youth center.

The story was told through interviews, family photos, home movies and church footage. Even Joe, the filmmaker, becomes a presence in the film, providing commentary and, at one point, confronting an angry bishop at the Chancery, the headquarters of the Archdiocese of Boston.

It is also the story of an Italian immigrant community, the closing of a parish and two parents' struggle to keep their faith while coming to grips with a terrible secret. The film tells Paul Cultrera's story within the larger context of the scandal in the Arch-

diocese of Boston, which unfolded several years after this Salem man confronted church hierarchy in 1994.

The Cultrera brothers spoke briefly with the crowd after the film ended but had to exit quickly because a long line had formed for the second showing.

"To see this many people is astounding," Paul Cultrera said in the theater lobby.

"This is the biggest audience we've had," Joe Cultrera said as shook hands and received words of congratulations. "I was worried because I thought maybe the story is all too familiar here. ... It was maybe a weight off my shoulders. This was always a question — if it was going to be accepted here."

The question was answered in loud applause.

"I think that film should be shown at all the seminaries," said Lorie Turmenne of Peabody as she pushed toward the theater exit.