



MY CITY



RULE MAKERS

Every day's a good day for Newark's resident documentarians

By Teja Anderson



Indie filmmakers Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno have made Newark their home for many years. They are passionate storytellers and key players in the city's rebirth. Known for producing public history documentaries that engage the public in critical thinking, the couple is currently in the midst of shooting the last of three films in what they like to call the "R Trilogy"—the first two being *Revolution '67* and *The Rule*.

The Rule opened to enthusiastic reviews in New York City after debuting at the Quad, and is

now out in theaters (and will run periodically on PBS stations into 2016). The documentary explores the success of Newark Abbey and its school, St. Benedict's Prep, as a model for inner cities—providing insights into the history of religion, immigration and education. It was initially conceived when the Bongornos were hired to film a fictional piece called *Monks in the Hood*, about the closing and subsequent reopening of the famed 150-year-old Newark school back in the early 1970s.

When Benedictine monks first came to the city in 1857 to serve the German community of Saint Mary's parish, they saw the need for a school to serve the growing working-

class Catholic population in Newark. The monks opened St. Benedict's College in 1868 on what is now Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. In the early 1900s, the majority of students were coming for the college prep curriculum, and so in 1917 the college curriculum was dropped, and the name of the school changed to St. Benedict's Preparatory School, or SBP for short.

By the early 1970s, the school's enrollment had dropped off significantly. Most of the alumni and their families had moved out of the neighborhood, which was now predominantly African-American. In 1972, SBP actually





closed its doors and 14 of the monks left. However, after a period of deep reflection and prayer, the remaining monks recommitted themselves to the education of the city's youth, and in 1973 SBP re-opened the campus, comprised of 15 buildings on 12 acres in Newark's University Heights. Today, the student population reflects the racial makeup of the city: Of the current enrollment of 554 young men (grades 7-12), 47% are African-American, 29% Hispanic- 12% white and 12% other ethnicities. It was while researching this dramatic rebirth of the school that the Bongiorno found the inspiration for *The Rule*, which took three and a half years to complete.

The Rule tells a story of urban inner-city success. Newark spends a staggering 12 billion dollars a year on education, yet only one in four students is likely to graduate from high school on time. By contrast, over the past decade SBP has had a near-100% college acceptance rate for its graduating seniors. This statistic stunned and intrigued Marylou and Jerome, prompting them to make their 90-minute documentary. Their desire is that the St. Benedict story can serve as a model for fixing fractured inner-city education, not just in Newark but elsewhere in the country.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

"Our films originate from our relationship," says Marylou Bongiorno. "Our individual thinking influences the other, and then our collective thoughts and passions guide us to the subjects we choose to explore, and what we want to say about them. The passion to explore has to be collective, otherwise it's no fun—we both have to be deeply into it."

Jerome echoes this sentiment, adding, "As far as roles, Marylou is the chief, which means that she's the director and producer. She's the interface to everyone outside the team, and she makes the final decisions. Ultimately, she's the one that brings the project to fruition. I do the work that can be done alone, the technical stuff—the camera, editing, music, animation, writing—the things that take sitting quietly, by yourself, to get right. When we're on-set, doing a narrative or documentary, Marylou organizes everyone and sets the tone so that I can come in and shoot. She arranges



it so that I can stay focused on getting the picture and sound right."

For *The Rule*, this meant obtaining access to SBP at all hours of the day and night. It also meant getting the monks to lift the cloister and allow a woman into their living space—which they happily agreed to. The 51 monks at St. Benedict's were quite eager to share the methods they have used to guide young men whose needs are not always addressed in traditional schools. As the film reveals, these methods aren't exactly new. On the contrary, in fact, the monks discovered these fundamentals in an almost 1,500-year-old monastic handbook called *The Rule of Saint Benedict's*.

The modern iterations of these elements include Counseling, History, Adaptability, Commitment, Hope, Connectedness, Trust, Leadership, Community, Perseverance, Spirituality and Stability. *The Rule* explores these ideas in action in all facets of student life, from experiential learning to team sports to morning convocation. Since the Bongiorno live in Newark, it was easy to pop into SBP frequently and at all hours.

The Rule is already having an impact. Teachers College of Columbia University is developing a study guide for policymakers and educational practitioners, using *The Rule* as one vehicle for urban school reform in the public sector.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The final film in R Trilogy, *Rust*, will examine the decline of America's industrial urban centers and once again focuses on Newark. Log onto bongiornoproductions.com for more information or to order a DVD of *The Rule*. 