

# Filmmakers Detail Newark Abbey's Fight For Education

by Debra Lawless

Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno of Newark, the husband-wife team of filmmakers behind Bongiorno Productions, like to say that they met over a fetal pig.

Both majored in biology in college, went on to study medicine and neurophysiology at the graduate level, and eventually worked around to filmmaking. By now their films, both documentaries and fictional works, have won awards and been nominated for Emmy Awards.

The pair will be on hand at the Eldredge Public Library this Thursday, Sept. 5 at 6:30 p.m. to present their new film "The Rule." In this film they show how monks at St. Benedict's Preparatory School (SBP) in Newark, N.J. transform some male inner-city students from probable dropouts into high school—and then college--graduates. After the film the Bongornos will answer questions from the audience.

Newark is known as a "tough, gritty city," and it is home to the Bongornos. Obviously, the problems and challenges of Newark's students, where the dropout rate is 78 percent, are radically different from those in Chatham and Harwich. Yet in SBP, the college acceptance rate is near 100 percent. How do the monks do it? Sometimes all that is needed is to be shown another way.

"The education of inner city kids has to be very different from the education of their affluent counterparts because the two have vastly different needs based on their envi-

ronments," the Bongornos said in an e-mail interview. "SBP has worked hard over the past 40 years to develop tactics to give inner city male teens, the most vulnerable population, what they need.

"Consequently these kids stay in school, graduate and lead productive, purposeful and meaningful lives. Newark public schools are obviously not helping the kids deal with the baggage, as evidenced by the abysmally low 22 percent graduation rate and high crime rate."

"Baggage" is the term the Bongornos use to describe a whole host of issues such as growing up in a culture of poverty and crime that the Newark kids face on a daily basis. Quite simply, that baggage impedes their learning.

SBP has been run by the monks of Newark Abbey since 1868. The school's philosophy follows the 1,500-year Benedictine tradition of Christian education. And what is "the rule?" Simply stated, it says that the monks must adapt to changing times, serve in one place, and "whatever hurts my brother hurts me," the Bongornos say.

SBP now has more than 550 students in grades seven through 12, and over 50 faculty members. The school receives more applicants each year than it can admit.

While only a third of black males graduate from college, 70 percent of SBP alumni graduate from college, Bongiorno says, and "that's a big deal."

Jerome Bongiorno grew up in Brooklyn and Staten Island and attended Catholic boys' schools. Marylou Bongiorno grew up in Newark. When they left the field of science, they began their artistic careers as playwrights. "We decided to create a short film, submitted it to New York University Graduate Film School, got accepted, and plunged into filmmaking," they recall.

"The Rule" is the second film in the Bongornos' "3 R's Trilogy" of documentary films on inner cities. The first was "Revolution '67," which detailed "the decades of neglect that led up to the urban riots/rebellions/revolutions in the '60s and the plight of these cities today," the Bongornos

say. "The Rule," in contrast, "offers a glimmer of home in the form of an amazing abbey and school in the heart of Newark." The third film in the series will be the upcoming "Rust," which focuses on solutions to reducing the city's poverty rate.

"We live in Newark, so we see the misery and naturally we work to improve the city," they wrote.

So how do the monks turn these students around?

"The monks realized long ago that in order for students to succeed academically, the school has to help them deal with the baggage they carry and, in some severe cases, when coming from a particularly dysfunctional home environment, the school has built a residence to house and parent them," they say. The school offers extensive counseling programs—sometimes even bringing in the parents for counseling--has a daily school-wide convocation, and runs an 11-month school year. Faculty and staff are available to the students 24/7.

"Father Edwin Leahy, St. Benedict's Prep headmaster, distills their success to one word: flexibility," they add. "Schools can't be rigid. Dead things are rigid, according to Father Ed."

"The Rule" was released last spring. The Bongornos hope their film will be widely shown so that the model of education reform that SBP provides may be copied in other troubled school districts. Calling SBP "a beacon of hope," Teachers College at Columbia University is creating a study guide for policymakers and educators as a companion to the film.

"With 'The Rule,' there's no longer any excuse for inner city school failure," the Bongornos say. "The secret is out and the public must demand that policymakers and educators implement these low-to-no-cost-commonsense tactics immediately."

"The Rule" will be shown this Thursday, Sept. 5 at 6:30 p.m. in the Eldredge Public Library. For more information call the library at 508-945-5170.