

- Arts

Monks in the Hood

The Rule is a documentary-in-progress that chronicles the Newark Abbey Benedictine monks

- By Marcia Worth
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St. Benedict's Prep headmaster, Rev. Edwin D. Leahy, O.S.B., blesses 9th graders on their week-long 50 mile hike along the Appalachian Trail. Credit: Courtesy of and © Bongiorno Productions Inc.

WBGO-Newark host Doug Doyle will be joined Friday by Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno and Father Albert Holtz, to discuss their documentary on the monks of Newark Abbey and their commitment to the Brick City. The show begins at 7:30 pm.

The monks of Newark Abbey aren't moving. The first two Benedictine monks arrived in Newark in 1857, focused on the growing community of German immigrants. When their numbers grew, Saint Mary's Priory was raised to the status of an abbey in 1884. It lost that status briefly, but like the monks who reside, work, and teach there, the Abbey has deep roots in Newark. The monks and their commitment to New Jersey's largest city is the focus of a documentary-in-progress entitled *The Rule*.

The sixth-century rule that lends the documentary its title is Saint Benedict's dictates to his followers. Those beliefs influence the monks of Newark Abbey today, especially the instructions to adapt to changing times; to serve in one place; and that "whatever hurts my brother hurts me," notes Marylou Bongiorno. With her husband, Jerome Bongiorno, Marylou Bongiorno began filming the documentary in May at the Abbey. Their film includes a close look at Saint Benedict's Preparatory School and its record of success.

The Emmy-nominated, award-winning duo saw their most recent project, *Revolution '67*, which was broadcast nationally on *P.O.V.*, and shown locally at First Presbyterian and Trinity Church, claim international prizes, including two national awards for outstanding film of American history. Their interest in Newark Abbey was sparked by South Orange resident Thomas McCabe, who wrote *Miracle on High Street*, a history of Saint Benedict's Prep.

Previously, the so-called "monks in the hood" were, says Marylou Bongiorno, "an untold story, despite their long history in the city. It is, says Bongiorno, "a story that needs to be told."

A signature moment in McCabe's book sees the monks standing on the roof of Saint Benedict's on High Street in downtown Newark in the summer of 1967, watching the turmoil below. The school closed briefly thereafter, then reopened with a small cadre of teachers and students. Saint Benedict's current student body numbers more than 550 in grades 7 -12, in addition to more than 50 faculty members. More students apply each year that the school can admit, a rarity in Catholic schools of the present.

The school asks a great deal of students. Admissions materials and the school profile describe a "demanding but supportive, tough but caring" environment. The curriculum is described repeatedly as "rigorous," with an 11-month academic year that began this week.

Classes meet for 80-minute periods; summer reading is mandatory and includes works such as *The Iliad* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; and students adhere to a dress code.

Kieran Lenahan, Class of 2011, who will attend Davidson College in North Carolina, said in June, "Being a part of Benedict's is something you can not fully understand unless you've experienced it yourself." Lenahan lives in South Amboy and commuted 40 minutes each morning and afternoon. "Benedict's is the only place where I could be pushed beyond my limits and encouraged to try things that I never thought I could do," he explains.

It's this "dynamism" that the Bongornos are hoping to capture on film, both in *The Rule* and in a fictional telling of the story also in progress. "You can see their passion," says Bongiorno of the monks. The film will also reflect the community of Saint Benedict's Prep, and its "diversity of kids," including students from Haiti, Mongolia, the Ironbound and other Newark neighborhoods, as well as suburban communities. "Part of what we've seen the monks do," explains Bongiorno, "is adapt to changing times and situations."

And, further, she and her husband raise a question that they hope to answer. "How do they do it?" asks Bongiorno of the monks and the successes they have seen in their students and other good works in Newark. "We're looking for very tangible steps that can benefit all of Newark," says Bongiorno. "The monks value commitment, community, counseling, the value of individuals. How do we take that to the larger community?"

Revolution '67, the Bongornos' most recent previous work, focuses on the Newark riots. That film has travelled locally and globally, and is often shown as a prelude to discussion. At the South Orange showing in November, the film was followed by personal recollections from locals who recalled the summer of 1967. Bongiorno anticipates using *The Rule* as a similar springboard to discussions of what could and should be done in American cities.

Saint Benedict's is run with the principle, "What hurts my brother hurts me," always in mind. The Bongornos' film, *The Rule*, aims to demonstrate a powerful corollary of that sixth-century dictate: what serves my brother or sister serves me. Newark residents both, the Bongornos look to ways that what serves the cities, serves us all.

Patch will follow the Bongornos through the making of the film.. Check back for further stories and information about when and where to view the film.