

The Star-Ledger

Could a 1,500-year-old Catholic tradition be the answer to Newark's education problems?



NEWARK — You don't have to look far to find depressing statistics about Newark.

The Brick City suffered from **111 murders last year**; more than a third of its residents **fall below the poverty line**; the unemployment rate of Essex County sits at a stubbornly high 10 percent.

In the face of those odds, how do students muster up any interest in learning? How do schools adequately prepare kids to not only graduate, but to thrive?

A new documentary called "The Rule," attempts to answer those questions and more by chronicling the achievements of St. Benedict's Preparatory School in Newark.

"They are succeeding and they have lots to teach us," said Newark filmmaker Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno.

Though its student population of mostly African American and Latino boys face issues of poverty and violence, the 146-year old school has a near 100 percent college acceptance rate, Tibaldo-Bongiorno said.

Those who have been following **the news** lately, may recognize St. Benedict's as the school that educated **Robert Peace**, a 30-year-old African-American Yale University graduate who was eventually murdered in his Newark basement in an apparent drug-related shooting.

So what's St. Benedict's secret?

Tibaldo-Bongiorno and her husband and co-filmmaker, Jerome Bongiorno, seem to think the school, run by Benedictine monks of Newark Abbey, has had success by following a 1,500-year-old Catholic philosophy, which the documentary calls the "The Rule."

The 72-chapter philosophy(or "common sense guide"), written in the 6th century by St. Benedict of Nursia, guides the Benedictine monks on how they should live in the community, with an emphasis on serving others.

As a result, the school is particularly good at creating a 24/7 "oasis" of support for the students, Tibaldo-Bongiorno said.

The school year lasts 11 months, with time for experiential learning and counseling built into their schedules; A residence is available for students 24/7 if they can't go home; Freshman take a trip through the Appalachian Mountains.

“That was really an eye opener for us,” she said. “It was really a ray of hope for us, because they have been adapting what they do for inner city of kids.”

Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Bongiorno, both Newark residents, are dedicated to delving into the city' most significant issues through film. The couple produced a documentary about the 1967 riots in Newark, and plan to produce another about poverty, said Tibaldo-Bongiorno

The Rule was featured at the Montclair Film Festival and independent theaters in New York and Los Angeles.

Tibaldo-Bongiorno also showed the film at Columbia University's Teacher's College, where a group of educators

plan to write a guide for schools based on the documentary.

But Tibaldo-Bongiorno hopes everyday Newarkers will watch the film and take away valuable lessons about education.

“I think it will get everyone to think about how we want our schools and how we want our city to survive,” she said.

The film debuts on National PBS tonight. It will also air on NJTV on Sunday at 10 p.m. and on Monday on Channel 13 at 10 p.m.

Naomi Nix may be reached at nnix@njadvancemedia.com. Follow her on Twitter [@nsnix87](#). Find [NJ.com](#) on Facebook.