

# THE *Hollywood* REPORTER



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## Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno's documentary profiles St. Benedict's Prep, an inner city school run by monks in a Newark monastery

As with so many socially themed documentaries, *The Rule* barrages the viewer with a dizzying array of dispiriting statistics, in this case about the city of Newark, New Jersey. We learn that it has a 32% poverty rate; the seventh-highest murder rate in the U.S; and that only 13% of its young people graduate college, among other things. But this film by husband and wife filmmakers **Marylou Bongiorno** and **Jerome Bongiorno** offers an uplifting ray of hope in its portrait of St. Benedict's Prep, a nearly 150-year-old inner city prep school run by the black-robed monks of Newark Abbey.

The filmmakers, Newark residents who previously chronicled the city's despairing conditions in their acclaimed documentary *Revolution '67*, chronicle the teaching methods of the monks which are inspired by the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, a 1500-year-old monastic handbook. Boiled down to a dozen principles including "Adaptability," "Preparedness," "Trust," "Spirituality" and "Commitment," it serves as a guide for the monks whose approach has produced stupendous results. St. Benedict's Prep, whose students are mainly African-American and Latino young men, has a near 100% college acceptance rate, with many of its students attending Ivy League schools and some 85% graduating.

The film includes fly-on-the-wall depictions of the monks interacting with their young charges, as well as interviews with many of the friars, a seasoned bunch including the tough-talking, no-nonsense Father Ed and a black instructor who jokingly refers to himself as "a monk in the 'hood." Along the way we're presented with a brief lecture detailing the history of Benedictine Monks as well as a profile of this Newark monastery, which was founded in 1857.

Music and crude animation alleviate the occasional dryness of the proceedings, although the choice of an artificial voice to provide various explanatory tidbits seems a bit odd. The film's chief strength is in the engaging personalities of the monks, who are clearly not suffering from burnout, and the depiction of the students engaging

in such activities as a five-day hike on the Appalachian Trail.

It's a powerful success story, albeit one that may be hard to replicate in other situations. But that hasn't dissuaded the filmmakers, who mention in the press notes that they're working with Columbia University's Teachers College to develop a study guide for policymakers and educators using *The Rule* as a tool for urban school reform. More power to them.

*Production: Bongiorno Productions in association with KTWU*

*Director/producer: Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno*

*Director of photography/editor/composer: Jerome Bongiorno*

*No rating, 86 minutes*