

HERALD NEWS

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DOCUMENTARIES

Filmmaker captures nun's struggle with the church

By **SUZANNE TRAVERS**

Herald News

NEW YORK — After sixteen years in Catholic school, Barbara Rick says she hoped she'd never see, or hear, another nun.

But in May 2000, Rick, an Emmy-award-winning filmmaker and Ridgewood native, was checking the day's news at her weekend job as an ABC News writer when a New York Times article on Sister Jeannine Gramick captured her attention with emotional force.

The previous summer, the Vatican officially ordered Sister Gramick silenced. After 30 years in a ground-

breaking ministry of advocacy, justice and reconciliation for gay and lesbian Catholics, Sister Gramick was forbidden to write or speak publicly about homosexuality.

Following a 10-year investigation, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith determined that in her efforts to show the "face of compassion" to homosexual Catholics and their families, the nun had not sufficiently emphasized Church teaching that homosexual acts are "evil" and "intrinsically disordered." Sister Gramick was permanently barred from conducting the workshops and

Please see **DOCUMENTARY, D5**



KEVIN R. WEXLER / Herald News

Barbara Rick's film "In Good Conscience" will premiere at Lincoln Center on Wednesday.

Documentary: Film explores nun's struggle with the Vatican

Continued from D1

retreats, some with the parents of gay Catholics, that had been her life's work.

After months of reflection, Sister Gramick spoke out.

"I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression by restricting a basic human right," she told the Times. "To me, this is a matter of conscience."

Rick, a graduate of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Ridge-wood, Immaculate Heart Academy in Washington Township and Fordham University, had left the Church, mainly in frustration at the hierarchy's policies on women. But she found herself profoundly moved and inspired by Sister Gramick's words and refusal to be silenced. She felt called to tell the story of, as she puts it, "one woman taking on the Vatican."

"In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith," a feature-length documentary, is the result. The film has its U.S. premiere at Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theatre on Wednesday, June 9, and will be shown the following day at NewFest, a gay-and-lesbian film festival in New York.

Filmed in the United States and Rome, "In Good Conscience" portrays Sister Gramick's life and work, the impact she has had on gay and lesbian Catholics and their families, and the price she has paid for her stance. Determined to keep focused on the issues and act as a bridge between gay and lesbian communities and the Church, Sister Gramick has never publicly declared herself lesbian or straight. She has continued her ministry and to speak out in spite of the Vatican directive.

The film also explores the idea of conscience, a central tenet of Catholic teaching and one the nun refers to as "the best kept secret in the Catholic Church."

Traditional Church teaching

has long held that conscience is a person's final arbiter of right and wrong. It emphasizes that Catholics have a duty to form their consciences by consulting sources of moral wisdom, including the church hierarchy, and cautions that one's conscience can err. But the teaching holds that, in the end, one must do what one understands to be right.

Rick says the film, like Sister Gramick's ministry, revolves around this idea of "the primacy of conscience, and the importance of each person to examine their actions, motives, church teachings, science, the opinions of learned people, and then hold it all up to the light and make their life decisions accordingly."

Rick's own path has come from this kind of spiritual reflection. The walls of her cozy officer near Union Square are covered with photographs and memorabilia from her days at NBC, where she worked as producer for newsman Gabe Pressman for seven years. The pair won two Emmy awards for their documentaries on the homeless and hunger in New York.

But she felt a desire to have a greater place for spirituality in both the process and product of her work. Living in Hawthorne from 1994 to 1996, regrouping after a divorce, she took stock of her life and the direction she wanted to move in.

"I had done a lot of social justice work over the years (in the news stories she produced)," she says. "But there was a dimension missing in me, and the work, that was born out of my divorce and going through hard times in life. There was a recognition that there's a lot more to life than material gain."

Meditating one day in her Hawthorne apartment, she came up with the name for her production company, Out of



CYNTHIA O'MURCHU / Special to the Herald News

Sister Jeannine Gramick, the subject of Barbara Rick's documentary film, is shown in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

the Blue Films Inc.

"It just occurred to me that a lot of good things had happened to me out of the blue," she says.

Reflecting Rick's typical thoroughness, a company statement declares its mission is to "serenely, enthusiastically, and profitably create critically and commercially successful documentaries and feature films that explore, articulate and celebrate humanity."

Since then, Rick has co-produced "She Says: Women in News" – a documentary about women journalists and the way they have changed the news business and how news is covered – that won a national Emmy award in 2001.

Another production, "Sounds Sacred," explores how humans connect to the spiritual through sound.

Rick's crew for "In Good Conscience" includes director and co-producer Albert Mayseles, dubbed a godfather of documentaries for his 1970 classic "Gimme Shelter."

"As a television journalist for more than 20 years, objectivity (alleged objectivity, anyway) is a longtime practice," Rick said in a director's statement for "In Good Conscience." "But this

subject – the Catholic Church – is one that stretches me."

Still, she said fairness and honesty in examining the issues and answers raised in the film were essential.

And in the end, those years of Catholic school had a lasting impact on the film.

"This is a film about a woman of faith doing justice," she said.

"That's something that the Jesuits teach. All of this is in me. My roots are Catholic. I'm using everything I've been taught as a Catholic to try and transcend the limitations and mistakes of Catholicism."

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