



'Frontline' to show Salem priest abuse story

By Tom Dalton , Staff writer

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SALEM - The award-winning public television series "Frontline" will make its first foray into the priest sex abuse scandal when it shows a documentary next month about the abuse of a former Salem altar boy.

On Jan. 16, "Frontline" will present "Hand of God," a film by Joseph Cultrera, a New York City filmmaker who grew up in Salem. Cultrera tells the story of his older brother Paul's abuse by the late Rev. Joseph Birmingham, who served at St. James Parish from 1965 to 1970. Birmingham died in 1989.

"I was just knocked out by this film," said Michael Sullivan, executive producer for special projects at "Frontline," which is produced at WGBH in Boston. "Everyone had the same reaction - that it was a truly compelling story about the scandal and maybe not unlike a film we would have done ourselves. ... It meets our mantra of a terrific film that takes you to the heart of a great issue."

Sullivan, a Marblehead resident, has supervised many "Frontline" projects, including "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero."

This will be the national debut for "Hand of God," which has been shown at film festivals around the country and, locally, to packed audiences at CinemaSalem. "Frontline" has an average national television audience of nearly 6 million.

"We're thrilled," Joseph Cultrera said. "At the beginning of this process, if I had to pick a place where I wanted this film to end up that would have been it."

"Hand of God," which is filled with home movies and scenes from the city's Italian neighborhood, tells about a victim who conducted his own investigation and who confronted church officials long before the scandal became a national story.

The film also focuses on Cultrera's parents, who still live in Salem, and on their struggle of faith after learning of the abuse and, years later, after the Archdiocese of Boston closed their parish church, St. Mary's Italian Church.

Paul Cultrera was 14 in the winter of 1964-65 when he made a Saturday confession with Birmingham at St. James Church. For penance, the priest told him to go to the rectory the following Monday for counseling - beginning a period of abuse that lasted for several months.

Cultrera kept the abuse a secret until telling his ex-wife in 1990, the start of a long recovery. He later placed a classified advertisement in newspapers in Salem and other communities where Birmingham had served. "Do you remember Father Birmingham?" read the ad, which listed a P.O. box. He got nearly 20 responses in a week, including one from someone who said he had been abused by the priest.

Paul Cultrera's investigation led him in 1995 to the front door of the archdiocese - seven years before the scandal broke.

The film includes confrontations with two high-ranking church leaders, Bishop John McCormack of Manchester, N.H., and Bishop Richard Lennon, former interim head of the Boston Archdiocese. McCormack had served with Birmingham at St. James.

"I think what clinched the deal for me was the portrait of arrogance of high clergy in Boston," Sullivan said. "It was just jaw-dropping. I had never seen it revealed in such stark fashion before. ... In many ways, to me, it was the most powerful part of the film."

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