

# Mary Fishman

## and Her BAND of SISTERS

A stylized illustration of a nun in a black habit with a white veil and a yellow cross on her chest. She is holding a large orange sign on a black pole. The sign is blank.

**H**ER DREAM was to become a feature filmmaker, but that seemed out of reach when she was a teenager in Illinois.

“That was something that I’d had in my head since high school, but it just didn’t seem possible,” Mary Fishman tells *St. Anthony Messenger* in her Chicago home last September. “But I hadn’t thought about documentary filmmaking.”

The 54-year-old’s dream came to life in September 2012 when her 88-minute documentary, *Band of Sisters*, premiered at the Gene Siskel Film Center in Chicago. It’s been shown around the country since then, and is being released on DVD this month.

Here’s the essence of the film: Fishman tells the story of Catholic sisters in the United States of today—not as stern, older women in habits, but as beautiful, compassionate women with a sense of humor who are still doing good and contributing to society, especially in areas of social justice.

“It’s such an exciting and important story in terms of American history, women’s history, and the history of Catholicism. I wanted to get it while the people who lived through it are still vital and still able to tell it firsthand.”

True, Fishman was educated by sisters at St. Walter Parish School and at Mother McAuley Liberal Arts High School, but it took her career in architecture and her mother’s declining health before she was ready to hear the idea of making a film about sisters. It became an eight-year odyssey that not only made her dream of

filmmaking come true, but also rebuilt her faith along the way.

Fishman, who earned undergraduate degrees in architecture and French from the University of Notre Dame, worked as an architect in Chicago for a year after graduation. Then she worked for several firms in California, where she earned a master’s degree in urban planning from the University of California, Los Angeles, followed by a two-year stint in France working periodically as an architect.

But homesickness and the country’s bad economy pushed the second youngest of seven children back home to Chicago where she volunteered at a historic preservation nonprofit. Once a position opened in the city’s planning department, Fishman got a job in historic preservation and then in zoning. She spent eight years shaping the city of Chicago, but her passion was still in filmmaking.

Fishman’s mother, Rita, whose health was waning, gave her the push she needed. Fishman gave up her career to care for Rita, who suffered complications from radiation she received for colon cancer in 1993. Fishman says she was angry at God and that her faith was tested as she watched her mother suffer. She died in 2008.

It was through her spiritual director (a Sister of Mercy) that Fishman began to grow her faith in light of her mother’s suffering and death.

“I think that’s helped me really to become more of an adult in my faith,” she says.

She lost a preoccupation with rules. “It really

This first-time filmmaker took her love and admiration for Catholic sisters and turned it into a documentary that changed her faith and her life.

**BY TRACY RUSCH**





## Behind the Scenes

*Band of Sisters* is a documentary about how Catholic sisters embraced Vatican II's challenge for religious communities to rediscover their founders' charism and to reengage in the world. For many, that meant entering the struggle for social justice.

In the film, producer Mary Fishman tells the stories of sisters who have devoted their lives to working with the poor, challenging injustice, and rediscovering the greatness of God's creation.

Sisters of Mercy Pat Murphy and JoAnn Persch, for example, worked to get a bill passed through the Illinois legislature to allow pastoral care for immigrant detainees. Halfway across the country, is Genesis Farm in New Jersey, cofounded by Dominican Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis in 1980. It is a model for 50 ecological farms, earth learning, and retreat centers founded by women's congregations in the United States and Canada.

The film shows sisters across the board, witnessing to their faith not only as organic farmers as justice advocates, but also as environmental attorneys, peace activists, holistic health-care practitioners, and podcasters.

"In the face of obstacles and threats cast by government agencies, the military, and the hierarchy of their own Church," it reads on Fishman's website, "the forward-thinking US nuns are on a mission of love, and it appears that nothing can stop them."

Go to [bandofsistersmovie.com](http://bandofsistersmovie.com) for upcoming screenings, trailers, and more about the DVD.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MOLDOR, RSM

*Band of Sisters* filmmaker Mary Fishman (left) enjoys an on-set laugh with JoAnn Persch, RSM, and Pat Murphy, RSM.

is more about how I find God in the everyday and in other people. That's an ongoing thing, of course, but I just feel more enriched. It's kind of like a well that I keep tapping into and I feel connected to the Church in that way," says Fishman.

To care for her mother, she had quit her job.

"I started taking night classes at Columbia College and also at Chicago Filmmakers," she recalls. And there she saw her opportunity. She had been grooming herself all along, through a film-studies course at Notre Dame and watching and analyzing movies. But did she, an architect, dare to make her own film?

When Fishman's older sister, Patty, suggested she make a film about the history of Catholic nuns in the United States, this architect dared to try. Her perception of Catholic sisters as older women who taught her in school was about to change.

"Patty gave me this book called *Aging with Grace*," about the famous Alzheimer's study with the School Sisters of Notre Dame. "It was a really good book that made the sisters come alive as people for me," Fishman says.

David Snowdon's book showed the sisters living lives outside of school, with stories and accomplishments that amazed Fishman.

"I saw that they had senses of humor. I saw how compassionate and really beautiful women they were and how they were still trying to do good," Fishman says. "Even when they got really old, they still wanted to contribute."

Little did Fishman know that her documentary filmmaking journey also would be a journey of faith.

### Catholic Roots

Although she was raised in a Catholic home by her Irish Catholic mother and Russian Jewish father, Fishman drifted away from the Church as a young adult.

"My faith is really different now than what it was taught in grammar school," Fishman says, admitting that her Catholic roots are too deep and ingrained to say she's anything but Catholic.

"I feel connected, especially with the Irish background. I see a Church that stands for poor people—stands up for people who are oppressed."

But some of the rules she learned didn't make sense. Fishman became disillusioned by the inequality of women in the Church and its teachings on homosexuality. At the same time,

she saw compassion override rules when her father died of a massive heart attack at a Catholic hospital. Fishman was a 22-year-old college student then.

She'll be forever grateful to the chaplain who told the family to tell their pastor that their father was baptized so he could be buried in the Church. Their pastor may not have allowed it if they hadn't, recalls Fishman. Instead, they had a church full of their father's and mother's friends and relatives.

"It's really compassion that's important," Fishman says.

But it wasn't until she returned to Chicago that she got involved in the local churches, including her home parish, St. Walter. It began with a reunion in 2005—she was working on the film at the same time. It was then that her faith began to evolve.

"I started to come back into the parish life. And I started getting in touch with nuns. Here was a place in the Church that was inclusive and where I felt it was welcoming of women, of their talent and their ability, and of gay and lesbian people," Fishman says. "It was allowing you to have questions and to talk about things and not expect to have answers. That, to me, was liberating."

She started to research and expand her Catholic understanding. She was especially influenced by reading the works of theologians Sister Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, Loretto Sister Elaine Prevallet, Passionist Thomas Berry, Trappist Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, and sisters who later became a part of the film (see box on p. 30).

"That's the kind of faith that excites me—where you're thinking about deep questions and you're entering into a deeper relationship with God, but also with other people. You're able to find God in the everyday life and in your encounters with people, but I'm sure my Catholic upbringing gave me the roots," she says.

### Practical Steps

In her parish, Fishman helped found St. Walter's Peace and Justice Committee with her sister, Patty, their mother, the pastor, and Sisters of Mercy Pat Murphy and JoAnn Persch, known for their human-rights efforts for immigrant detainees and deportees.

The budding filmmaker smelled a story. "Pat and JoAnn had this great story! It was right at the beginning of their journey with immigrant detainees and so that was perfect."

They were willing and close by.

"That's probably why I ended up filming a lot of it myself. It was so convenient and I figured, well, if it doesn't turn out, at least I can try again," Fishman explains.

A friend also told her about new projects done by his aunt's order—Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary—in Monroe, Michigan: a green renovation of the motherhouse that made it sustainable.

"I thought, *Well, that would be a nice place for me to start.*"

Fishman mentioned to a Monroe IHM that she had narrowed the film's focus down to social justice. After that, the floodgates opened. She was introduced to Sister Nancy Sylvester, IHM, who became a principal focus of the documentary.



PHOTO BY BILL GLADER

Sylvester gathered, by conference call, a focus group including Adrian Dominican Sister Carol Coston, Notre Dame de Namur Sister Mary Daniel Turner, and Amityville Dominican Sister Margaret Galiardi.

"They talked about what was important in this overall progression of sisters over the last 50 years: who were the key people, the key events."

Fishman learned something that she would carry with her long after the film was complete: how important contemplation is in a life of activism.

### Labor of Love

As part of her research, Fishman also attended gatherings of Call To Action, known for advocating changes in much of the way the Church operates. That's how she met Sister of St. Agnes Madeline Gianforte, cofounder of CORE/El Centro, a natural healing center for low-income persons—many of whom are immigrants—in Milwaukee.

"I was at the exhibition booth and I saw materials about the place. I thought, *That's*

One of the principal subjects of Mary Fishman's documentary is Sister Nancy Sylvester, IHM, who was once the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

really something. It's showing how sisters are still doing health care, but they're doing it in a new way," she says.

It was those kinds of encounters that opened a pathway to Fishman's passion.

"[The film] gave me the opportunity to meet with some of the most interesting women with unbelievable life experiences, talent, and education in theology, sociology, and psychology," says Fishman. "Seeing how they live out their faith—those are all real, spiritual experiences. I'm still absorbing those, too."

Fishman initially thought of editing the film on her own, but soon realized she needed someone with experience.

"I decided I really wanted someone to collaborate with, somebody to talk to about the film, somebody who would know it as well as I did or better," she says.

"And so I figured it would cost a lot of money, so I'm going to have to fund-raise even more. But I thought it would be worth it to have a really good editor and make it the best possible film it could be."

Digital Extras

For more on the film *Band of Sisters* and for additional resources on women religious, log in to your digital edition at [StAnthonyMessenger.org](http://StAnthonyMessenger.org).



PHOTO BY PAT FISHMAN

During the filming of *Band of Sisters*, Mary Fishman sought the help and expertise of film editor Bernadine Colish (right), who was intrigued by the film's concept and won over by Fishman's passion for it.

She had taken note of Bernadine Colish from a documentary on PBS. Fishman decided to call her. Fishman and Colish, a film editor since the early '90s, held an informal meeting at the "Women & Spirit" exhibit at Ellis Island, New York, in January 2011.

Fishman sent Colish everything: her film, film clips, and stills that she had collected from archives around the country.

Colish was intrigued with Fishman's idea for the film. That June, she became one of the more than 100 people involved in the making

of the film, from the women religious who starred in it to researchers, the composer, sound mixers, fund-raisers, camera people, and her creative and tech adviser, David E. Simpson.

After 10 months, from screening the footage to finishing, most of the ideas in Fishman's original cut ended up in the film.

"Her vision was right there from the beginning. All I did was expand upon what she did and tried to find a story arc," Colish wrote to *St. Anthony Messenger*. She also noted that, typical for these projects, they encountered challenges, had discussions, and needed to collect extra footage and restructure the film until the very end.

"The most challenging part," Colish continues, "was weaving the history with present-day footage, trying to make connections with the work the sisters are doing today with what they did in the past."

They wrapped up the film in early April 2012, just before the Vatican issued a critical report of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Then screenings of the film began, in over 60 cities in the past year and a half, most recently at the Cinema Village in New York City.

Fishman values these public screenings as a way to unite diverse people in a shared experience, and to celebrate sisters in the United States. Besides movie theaters, the film has been shown in art museums, at film festivals, Catholic universities, parishes, convents, and retreat centers all across the country.

### A Surprise Within

Fishman made the film hoping it would meet people along the way in their own faith journeys. She couldn't have predicted it would have such an effect on her own. She became a Mercy Associate, making a commitment to the Sisters of Mercy through a formal covenant to extend their mission through her independent lifestyle.

*Band of Sisters*, it seems, is Fishman's way of thanking the sisters for their contributions—past, present, and future—to the world. Ultimately, she hopes the film will keep their story alive.

"The whole point is that it's all about what the sisters have done. What would the world be like without them?" Fishman asks.

"They seem to be visionary. They can lead us to something better." **A**

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Tracy Rusch is a staff reporter for *The Catholic Herald*, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.