

'Band of Sisters' has local showings

Women religious film shown at three sites

By Dan Russo
Witness Staff Writer

DUBUQUE — Over the course of three days, hundreds attended local screenings of "Band of Sisters," an independent documentary film that focuses on the contributions of women religious to American society, particularly since the Second Vatican Council.

Filmmaker Mary Fishman held question-and-answer sessions after two showings at Mindframe Theaters in Dubuque Jan. 11-12. A third event on Jan. 13 was held at the Dominican motherhouse at Sinsinawa Mound in Sinsinawa, Wis.

"I was educated by Catholic nuns," Fishman told the Saturday night crowd. "Doing this film was the first time the sisters came alive to me as real people."

Fishman, who lives in Chicago, spent most of her career as an architect, before feeling a strong pull to become a documentary filmmaker. Taking eight years to make, "Band of Sisters" had a budget of about \$325,000.

"The message of the film is it's really ordinary people doing extraordinary things," said Fishman.

The film traces changes in Catholic women religious orders since the 1960s, including the abandonment of the habit by many orders and campaigns for social justice in areas such as immigration, housing, political activism, and environmentalism.

Many local sisters came to see the screenings, including Sister Marge Healy, PBVM.



Colleen Kuhl, director of Campus Ministry at Loras College, speaks with "Band of Sisters" creator Mary Fishman. (Witness photo by Dan Russo)

"I thought it was really well done," said Sister Marge. "I like how she followed different concerns. You feel the energy and the spirit of the women."

Fishman interviewed many sisters and researched the history of women's orders in the United States. The film recounts how women's religious roles and missions have expanded since their early ministries of founding hospitals and teaching. Fishman drew on many sources, including the women religious based in the Upper Midwest. One of the early scenes in the documentary features archival footage of sisters in full habits picking flowers, which was provided by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Dubuque.

One segment of the film tells the story of Sisters JoAnn Persch and Pat Murphy of Chicago. They begin praying outside a local deportation center. As part of an interfaith coalition, they advocated for the passage of HB 4613 in the Illinois state legislature.

The bill, which is now law, allows access to spiritual care for illegal immigrants housed in state detention facilities. The film shows the prison officials' initial opposition to the sisters going inside the facility and follows the two women after they achieve their goal.

Loras College Director of Campus Ministry Colleen Kuhl attended the showing Jan. 12. She actually met the two featured

sisters while on a trip with students to Chicago.

"I met them up close and personal," said Kuhl. "The film made me think of all of the things (sisters) did and how they affected the church on a big scale."

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*Film maker Mary Fishman
On "Band of Sisters"*

Aside from the social justice topics covered, the film does not shy away from covering controversies such as the campaign for women's ordination in the 1980s, the current Vatican doctrinal review of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and the apostolic visitation of individual women religious communities in the United States.

"They feel one of the main things to come out of Vatican II is that we're to follow our conscience; that our conscience is primary," said Fishman. "The sisters feel the church is big enough for questioning."

"Band of Sisters" initially premiered at the Gene Siskel Theater in Chicago. Fishman plans to continue bringing it to venues around the country.

"I think the film gives people a chance to express their love and admiration for sisters and what they've done," she said.