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Worker Greg Hernandez separates the different types of rubble after the demolition of Cabrini-Green buildings in the 1100 block of North Cleveland Avenue.

Four years in the making, a half-hour documentary by Ronit Bezael (right) looks at the North Side housing development and the community of people who have lived there.



Tribune photo by Heather Stone

Cabrini-Green voices ring out

By Melita Marie Garza
 TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

George Robbins cut hair for 40 years on the edge of Cabrini-Green, but his shop, his livelihood and many of his customers were in the way of city redevelopment plans for one of Chicago's most troubled public housing developments.

"Cabrini was kind of like a bad spot in the North Loop," said the soft-spoken Robbins, 62, whose Robbins Multicultural Barber Shop has been reborn in the upscale Gold Coast neighborhood, three blocks to the east of Cabrini.

Known even by gang members as "Rev" for his gentlemanly ways, Robbins is among those whose story is told by independent filmmaker Ronit Bezael in her new documentary, "Voices of Cabrini, Remaking Chicago's Public Housing."

The 30-minute film, four years in the making, will premiere at 6 p.m. Thursday at the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St.



Barber George Robbins, 62, has been cutting hair for 40 years and is now serving the third generation of some families.

Together with cinematographer Antonio Ferrera, Bezael collected 100 hours of footage to create a compelling narrative of a community in the grips of major change and crisis.

Cabrini-Green is part of a massive restructuring of public housing in Chicago that

includes the razing of roughly 10,000 public housing units—most of them in high-rise buildings—that the federal government has deemed no longer "viable."

"Voices of Cabrini" chronicles the anxieties, frictions and hopes stirred by that restructuring and the resulting reloca-

tion of thousands of Cabrini residents.

One classic exchange highlighted in the documentary summarizes the ongoing conflict between residents soon-to-be displaced and city officials.

"If you interrupt me when I'm talking, you won't hear what I'm saying," Adrienne Bryant, a city official tells a gathering of Cabrini-Green residents bent on discovering the city's plans to redevelop their neighborhood.

"Lady, you interrupted a whole way of life!" shouts a man in the audience.

Among the interrupted lives are those of Mark Pratt, 32, a school engineer, and his seven children. When Pratt announces plans to move out of Cabrini well before the family has to, his son Trevonte, then 10, accuses his father of "quitting."

But the elder Pratt, whose aspirations have long included owning a "Brady Bunch"-type home, responds: "What's wrong with me moving? I think you all deserve a back yard. I think I

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Cabrini

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 deserve a basement."

The documentary was completed before Pratt—a Columbia College graduate—and his wife bought their home, a \$119,000 two-story brownstone in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood.

"Everybody's comfortable there, we can spread out," said Pratt, who said he wanted to move without participating in any CHA programs.

"I just wanted to get completely away from CHA," he said. "You help people by teaching them to help themselves. You don't help them by giving them everything. That's what's wrong with living in a housing development now."

Pratt became involved in Bezael's film through a mutual friend from Columbia College, where Bezael was working on her master's degree in film.

Now a grant writer for Community TV Network in Chicago, Bezael has completed four other documentaries. Prior to "Voices," she worked at the National Film Board of Canada where she directed "When Shirley Met Flo-

rence," an award-winning 1994 film chronicling the 55-year friendship of two Jewish women.

After moving to Chicago from Canada, Bezael was struck by divisions between rich and poor in the city. She began the film as her Columbia College master's project in 1995.

"I want the film to serve as a discussion on the future of public housing," Bezael said. "The goal is to have a dialogue."

Cabrini-Green is not the only public housing development in the city undergoing wrenching change. Under a plan yet to be approved by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the entire Robert Taylor Homes high-rise development on the South Side is slated for demolition. But Cabrini-Green, the only family public housing development on the North Side, has been the most controversial project.

Built in 1942, originally to house returning World War II veterans, Cabrini-Green now has 8,000 residents, less than half the 20,000 that once lived there. Two high-rises have been demolished, several more have been emptied and eight are scheduled for demolition.

Pratt, a community activist who

also worked at a neighborhood youth center after graduating from Lincoln Park High School, said he doesn't believe the film will halt demolition.

But he still thinks Bezael's project is important.

"Twenty years from now, 25 years from now, when a sociologist or anyone starts to dig into this matter and figure out what happened with public housing—how it changed—there's going to be two sides," Pratt said.

"There's going to be the side that everyone sees now and there's going to be our side—and our side is documented through her work."

Like Cabrini, Robbins says his business is still a work in progress. He hopes his customers will rediscover him in his new location. But already he's lost about one-third of them.

He's cut hair for three generations of families.

The rent he must pay has tripled since being forced to move from his old shop on the north edge of Cabrini to make way for a grocery store. To compensate, Robbins has jacked up the price of a haircut to \$15 from \$12.

But he is still in business.