

# READER

FRIDAY, JULY 2, 1999 • VOLUME 28, NUMBER 39 • CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

THIS ISSUE IN FOUR SECTIONS

## On Film: as Cabrini emptied, the cameras rolled

**R**onit Bezael decided to come to Chicago to do her graduate work in film after reading *Directing the Documentary* by Columbia College professor Michael Rabiger. Soon the seeds of her own documentary were planted. "People would say, 'Avoid the projects, avoid Cabrini.' And that was very strange for me that there were these areas that you had to avoid, and I didn't understand why," she says. "I saw Cabrini when I took the train to school every day on the Ravenswood line, and when I saw that they were tearing it down I wanted to learn more about it." She decided to cover the dismantling of the housing project for a class.

Bezael got her undergraduate degree in Canada—at Montreal's McGill University—where the national film industry gives healthy support to documentarists. After graduating she took a job at the National Film Board of Canada, and one of her first assignments was as assistant editor on *Manufacturing Consent*, the acclaimed 1992 documentary about linguist and professional dissident Noam Chomsky.

When it came time to make her own movie, filming proved to be more of a challenge than Bezael had expected. She first visited Cabrini-Green in November 1995. "I was scared because it was so unfamiliar and [the residents] didn't know who I was." She filmed throughout that winter, getting mugged one day when she went alone. "That was a turning point, where I got educated pretty quickly." With codirector Antonio Ferrera and 30 or so fellow grad students from Columbia College, she continued filming over three years and at an estimated cost of \$10,000, largely provided by grants. The need to scramble for funding in the U.S. irks her.

"Documentary film here is so undervalued," she complains. "You really have to fight to get a little bit of money."

In the 30-minute video *Voices of Cabrini*, outraged residents and local activists—aware of the potential windfall to developers if they can clear out and convert the 71 acres of prime real estate on

which Cabrini-Green sits—demand to know where and how the city plans on moving the project's 10,000-plus inhabitants. In one scene Cabrini dwellers heckle David Tkac, special assistant to Mayor Daley, as he presides over a Chicago Housing Authority question-and-answer forum, studiously avoiding the subject of where Cabrini's current residents will live. For the most part Bezael emphasizes the human face of the controversy, observing the effects of the razings on a small cross section of the people who lived there. The film follows George Robbins, a soft-spoken older gentleman whose barbershop served Cabrini residents for 20 years. We see him pull the faded hair-product ads off his shop wall after receiving an eviction notice. Mark Pratt, a Columbia College student and father of six, plays with his kids and reminisces about 28 years of living in Cabrini. In a poignant moment, Pratt's nine-year-old son Trevonte looks out the window and describes the stigma associated with being a resident there.

Since completing her film, which served as her MFA thesis at Columbia, Bezael has been working part-time at the Community Television Network, a not-for-profit organization that teaches inner-city teens how to make videos, and she's planning to go to Cyprus in September to help produce a friend's documentary. She continues to promote *Voices of Cabrini*, but already her work has garnered praise from its subjects. "It was a fantastic idea, to finally get the voices of the community," says Pratt. "Before, we'd always been faceless voices in sound bites or nameless faces on the news."

*Voices of Cabrini* will be screened at 6 PM Thursday, July 8, at the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington (773-744-6630), and at 3 PM Friday and Saturday, July 9 and 10, at the Chicago Public Library's Near North branch, 310 W. Division (312-744-0992). Admission to all showings is free.

—PATRICK LOHIER



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