

THURSDAY
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Arts & Leisure

Gaining a voice

Documentary explores riches of Cabrini-Green

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Four years ago, when Canadian filmmaker Ronit Bezael came to Chicago to work on her graduate degree at Columbia College, she had never heard of Cabrini-Green.

Then Bezael began riding past the infamous public housing complex every day on the train. "People told me to avoid it. That's when I got interested," she said.

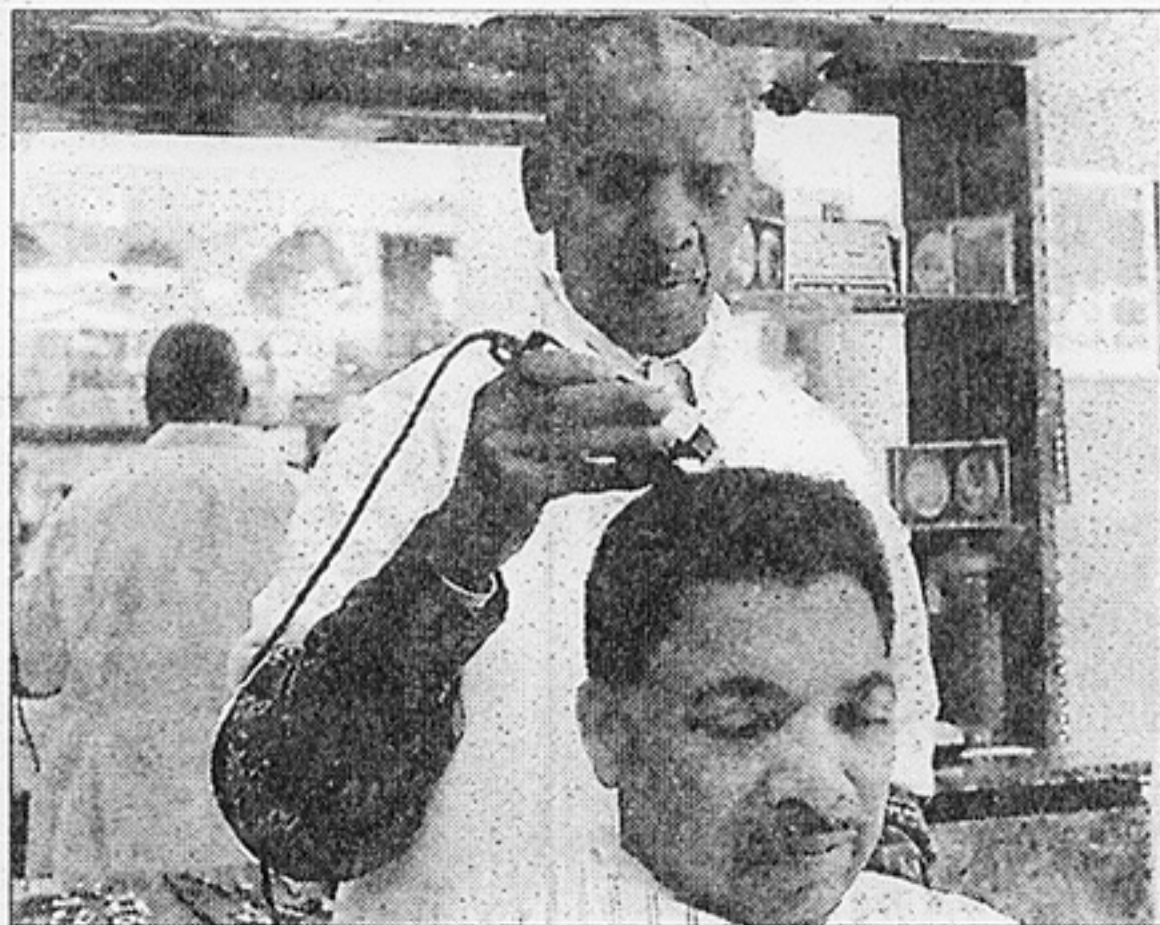
Bezael chose Cabrini and the plight of its residents as the topic for her master's thesis in filmmaking. Four years later, "Voices of Cabrini: Remaking Chicago's Public Housing" offers the story from the viewpoint of the community's longtime residents.

"I first went in there with a very naive perspective," Bezael said. "I thought: 'Don't tear down these buildings, preserve the community.' Then I began to learn how complicated the situation is at Cabrini."

The documentary lays out the ongoing battle between Cabrini residents and developers who plan to build mixed-income housing on the site. While those who live there agree that some of the buildings do need to be demolished, they are concerned about relocation. How many Cabrini residents will be included in the new mix?

Bezael, along with fellow filmmaker Antoniolio Ferrera, spent days and nights at Cabrini talking to residents. Gaining the confidence of the people was tough, she said.

"The first day of filming, I



George Robbins' barber shop, a repository of neighborhood memories, is one of the places featured in "Voices of Cabrini."

'Voices of Cabrini: Remaking Chicago's Public Housing'

6:30 tonight
 Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington
 Free
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was really scared," Bezael admitted. "It was all so foreign. I thought to myself, 'OK, we got in but are we going to get out?'"

Mark Pratt, who'd lived in Cabrini for 24 years, became Bezael's guide and one of those featured in the film. A teacher at Columbia, where Pratt was a student, approached him with the suggestion that he assist with the documentary.

"At first I was stunned that anyone would want to film at Cabrini," Pratt says. "But then I realized this would be more than

just a sound bite. It would be a chance to show that Cabrini is more than a battleground. It is a community."

Throughout the film, Bezael shows that Cabrini-Green is more than just notorious high-rises marked for demolition. It also takes in the surrounding area. One such place is Robbins Barber Shop, a repository of memories where people gather to talk.

"Cabrini became a real place to us," Bezael said. "We met a wide range of people; some threw rocks at us, others invited us into their homes. And the drugs and violence were real, too. There are no easy answers here. We hope through this film that people can experience some of the everyday riches of this community."

"Voices of Cabrini" also will be screened at 3 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Near North Branch of the Chicago Public Library, 310 W. Division.