

Carlow produces DVD highlighting co-founder, Mercy spirit

It's 1952. Pittsburgh is literally the "Steel City" with the smoke from steel mills hanging over neighborhoods inhabited by hard working families of immigrants enmeshed in the city's fiber.

One follows an energetic Sister Regis Grace as she purposefully climbs in full, black habit the steps of Mount Mercy College where young women have found a Catholic education in Pittsburgh's Oakland section since 1929. She has a message for those studying at the school.

"It all started with five," she says proudly to the camera, referring to the group that started the college: Sisters Philip Mary McCarthy, Eustochia McCormick, M. Frances Xavier O'Reilly, Fides Shepperson and Mother M. Irenaeus Dougherty.

"I am struck by firsts and scholarly accomplishments when an entirely different set of expectations are placed on women," she said.



Sister Sheila Carney helps Meighan Gerachis dress for her role as Sister Regis Grace.

most spiritually enriching experiences" of her life.

"I live a very secular life and trying to inhabit the mind and understand the soul of a woman so dedicated to God and to serving others changed me as a person, not just an actor," she said.

Meighan explained that she spent the time leading to the filming immersed in a myriad of technical issues, most pressingly, memorizing 45 minutes of continuous speaking.

"All of my actorly preoccupations fell away the moment I arrived at Carlow and felt the presence of all of the Sisters of Mercy, past and present. I was humbled and suddenly terrified at the magnitude of responsibility I felt to serve this story to the best of my ability. I had to use



Actress Meighan Gerachis portrays Sister Regis Grace, cofounder and first academic dean of Mount Mercy College, Pittsburgh, in a film about the institution that is now Carlow University.

She tells students that although they may not have accomplished their "first" yet, she had confidence that they will make their mark "for you are now connected to this lineage of bold women. Visionaries. Risk-takers."

This is not the real Sister Regis, the cofounder and first academic dean of Mount Mercy College, today Carlow University. Rather it is Meighan Gerachis, a Chicago actress who expertly plays the role in a new DVD titled "Most Unexpected Opening: Sister Regis Grace and the Founding of Mount Mercy College."

In an email interview, Meighan called playing Sister Regis Grace "one of the

Sister Regis' own words to encourage myself. I prayed and I prayed. I enjoyed the kindness of my hosts and made room for God in the endeavor. I cared very deeply, and I let go."

The 40-minute production sponsored by the university was the idea of Sister Sheila Carney, assistant to Carlow's president for Mercy Heritage, who wanted to share the compelling story of Mount Mercy's founding and Sister Regis' role in successfully shaping the institution.

"It was such a crazy thing to do when they did it, but they were driven by a sense of need that the Sisters of Mercy felt compelled to fulfill," Sheila said.

So, she contacted her niece, Megan Carney – a playwright, director and educator in Chicago – to research Sister Regis. Over the Fourth of July weekend in 2010, Megan worked with Sheila to gather material from school and convent archives for a script.

Sheila recalled that when Megan returned to the Convent of Mercy to read the script to a group of sisters, some wept as they listened and recalled fond memories of Sister Regis.



Sister Sheila Carney, left, watches as Joe Wittkofski, owner of Mind over Media "mugs" for the camera with actress Meighan Gerachis.



On the set of "Most Unexpected Opening: Sister Regis Grace and the Founding of Mount Mercy College."

"Megan had captured the spirit of Sister Regis, guided in part by her letters," she said.

Sister Cynthia Serjak, an accomplished composer and musician, composed and performed music for the play, which was also used for the production.

"The music evolved from time spent reflecting on the title itself and an effort to create a theme that would then develop in unexpected ways, just like the events portrayed in the play," said Cynthia, a former liturgical

musical director for the Sisters of Mercy and for parishes in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Today, she is minister of the New Membership Office for the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, in Silver Spring, Md.

On Sept. 21, 2010, Pittsburgh actress Kim Legler performed the one-woman play at the Carlow University Theater under the direction of Steve Fatla. The three stage performances were well received.

But Sheila wanted to spread the message of the play. So, she contacted Joe Wittkofski of Mind Over Media, a Pittsburgh production company, to see if he was interested in filming a stage performance. Not only was he interested, he suggested that the script be filmed as a movie.

Megan, director of the production, enlisted Meighan Gerachis to play Sister Regis. The project was filmed in July at the Convent of Mercy. In fact, much of the indoor shooting was done in an office that Sister Regis actually used during her years as motherhouse superior. The Sisters of Mercy previewed the film on Sept. 24. On Sept. 29, a red carpet was rolled out at the university's Kresge Theater for the film's premiere. About 200 patrons – staff, alumni and friends – enjoyed the film and eagerly sampled cookies in the shape of chess pieces as the film plays off Sister Regis's affection for the game of chess and how it reflected life.

In the future, Sheila would like to see the film used at orientations so that new students faculty and staff can get a sense of Sister Regis, and her spirit of Mercy tradition and values.

Photos courtesy of Mind overMedia.

You can view the DVD online by using these links:

Part 1:<http://www.screencast.com/t/Kjyprmtrd2keJ>

Part 2:<http://www.screencast.com/t/2p47mWteM>



The cast and crew of “Most Unexpected Opening: Sister Regis Grace and the Founding of Mount Mercy College” poses after a job well done. Pictured, from left, are Jason Mortimer, technician; Joe Wittkofski, owner of Mind Over Media, the film company; Jeff Stich, audio technician; Megan Carney, director and scriptwriter; actress Meighan Gerachis in full habit; Sister Sheila Carney; and Bridgett Harbaugh, producer.