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'Gimme Shelter': 30 years dealing with broken hearts

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jan. 21, 2014 NCR Today

Agnes "Apple" Bailey (Vanessa Hudgens) is 16 years old and living on the streets of New Jersey, but it could be Anyplace, USA. She is now homeless, hungry and pregnant. Apple has been in the foster care system and was in the custody of her drug-addicted mom, June (Rosario Dawson), but, unable to take her mother's abuse, she has run away to search for her biological father. His name is Tom Fitzpatrick (Brenden Fraser), he's a Wall Street broker, and Apple has never met him.

Tom, his wife, Joanna (Stephanie Szostak), and their children live in a luxurious suburban home. Tom is genuinely shocked to meet Apple. He is torn about her staying. They finally tell Apple she can stay, but neither want her to keep the baby.

Apple is totally alone and an emotional mess. She gets into a car accident and meets a priest at the hospital, Fr. Frank McCarthy (James Earl Jones), who tells her about a shelter where she will be welcome, no questions asked.

Although it is difficult for Apple to trust anyone, she decides to stay at the shelter. The housemother is Kathy (Ann Dowd), who founded the shelter many years before. All the young women there are pregnant, and it takes a little while for them to accept Apple. But one day, when June shows up, angry and abusive, demanding that Apple return to her custody, the girls step in to protect Apple. They have become a family. But Apple's journey is not over yet.

"Gimme Shelter" is based on a true story of one young woman at one of the Several Sources Shelters [1] founded by Kathy DiFiore in the early 1980s after spending some time homeless following the end of an abusive marriage.

Hudgens looks like a starving waif in the film. It was impressive to watch her during the first half of the film because she's eating as if there is no tomorrow -- as, indeed, she is not sure there will be. The theme of physical, spiritual, familial and social hunger is everywhere in this film. Dawson is scary as the angry drug-addicted mother who wants to control her daughter, even if she has no means or skills to care for her. Apple signals early on that she wants something different for her child; she does not want to become her mother.

From all the pro-life buzz from Catholic sources leading up to "Gimme Shelter," I expected to see an on-the-nose message movie. Instead, the words "pro-life" and "pro-choice" never appear in the film.

As writer/director Ron Krauss explained at the press day for "Gimme Shelter": "This is a pro-love film. 'Pro-life,' 'pro-choice' -- these are political terms that separate us. People at the screenings we have had around the country tell us they are intrigued by Apple's struggle and family situation and her life on the streets. They think this story is about their family, their mother, brother, or sister."

Krauss wrote the script while living at one of DiFiore's shelters for a year. "The story was evolving around me as I wrote. I could not put all the abuse that these girls went through in the movie. They trusted me to do a good

job telling their stories to help others who would go on to open shelters, to do acts of kindness."

"We made this film during the most difficult times in our country," Krauss continued, "because we are seeing the new face of homelessness. Dreams have been crushed. A homeless person is not a drunk old guy in the alley. It's you and me. 'Gimme Shelter' is about what homelessness means and what family means. It shows you are not an outcast if you are not in a perfect family. Family today is not the American dream we've been sold but anyone who is willing to help someone in life can be your family."

After meeting and speaking with DiFiore, I think that Ann Dowd's (you might remember her as the nun in the television show "Nothing Sacred") portrayal is right on. She's firm but leaves the young women free. At the press day, DiFiore described her shelter to journalists: "This home, this shelter, makes you feel like you can succeed. Everyone needs someone in life, and Apple finds her people, a new family, after a terrible life from her mother. The shelter is a place where healing can happen.

"These girls learn how to love, to trust again. They feel this mass of comfort around them. We don't tell the girls they have to leave. When they are ready to leave, they will have a plan and we tell them that you and your child can come back until he or she is 18 years old. We are not just going to help you have the child but we will be with you throughout to raise your child."

Hudgens lived at the shelter for two weeks to prepare for her role. A journalist asked her if the girls and young women recognized her, and she said they did not. Their lives did not include "High School Musical" and other films or television shows that made Hudgens' career.

"Gimme Shelter" is not a religious film per se, and it is probably not the greatest film you will see this year, but it might be the most important one. It changes the tone of the pro-life and anti-abortion debate by showing rather than telling -- or yelling -- how to live the Gospel and love as Jesus does. It is a film about healing. I think the story of "Gimme Shelter" is right in line with what Pope Francis is telling us every day: to remember the poor and the marginalized.

DiFiore really impressed me. Everything about her is understated and kind. She has a book coming out in the next few months, and I think it will shed more light on her experience and spirituality that the film has time to do. At the end of the press day, she said, "At the shelter we have a statue of Jesus with no hands. This is so that we will be the hands of Jesus. This is what this movie is all about. To help people want to be the hands of God for others, and in so doing to heal the world."

Kathy DiFiore has been dealing with broken hearts for more than 30 years, and "Gimme Shelter" shows how hearts are healed and what we can do to change a life and change a culture.

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[1] http://www.severalsources.net/