

‘I love my job,’ says ‘shelter lady’ who inspired film ‘Gimme Shelter’

By Mark Pattison

Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON - Kathy DiFiore has spent more than half of her life as the “shelter lady,” taking vacant convents and other buildings in New Jersey and turning them into shelters for unwed pregnant women who see few other options available to them.

The work of DiFiore, now 67, was made into a feature film, “Gimme Shelter,” which was issued on DVD earlier in the spring. Because she is credited as a producer of the movie, DiFiore will receive a Christopher Award May 15 in New York, as the film was one of four winners in the movie category.

“It’s closer to 35 years as the shelter lady,” she told Catholic News Service in a May 2 telephone interview before heading to one of the shelters. “I love my work.”

Unlike some people who have winced when their life story was brought to the big screen, DiFiore liked “Gimme Shelter.”

“I thought that the movie was a very excellent depiction of what these young women go through when they’re traumatized with an unplanned pregnancy,” she said.

“They need a support group, love, confidence, and a direction so they can become good mothers.” Writer-director Ronald Krauss, who spent more than a year visiting DiFiore’s shelters, “captured it magnificently,” she added.

Asked whether the need is greater now for the young women who enter her shelters, she told CNS, “I see the need as greater for them to be taught about God and his love. And I see the (women’s) ability to transition and to think, ‘yeah, there is a God,’ and the ability to give God a try or the sense that the Holy Spirit can guide them. We give each of them a Bible, and their exposure to even that concept is, ‘OK, I’m going to read this.’”

Entering a shelter, most women have “a lack of knowledge of God, but once they get into the shelter program there’s the concept of grace - that they are loved, and that God loves their baby, and that he is accessible to them. And that’s a good thing, a good thing,” she noted.

DiFiore said not all women take advantage of this opportunity. “Gimme Shelter” has one such character, who, according to her, “depicts a small quantity who doesn’t like the shelter.”

Despite the rigors of running the shelters, nothing prepared DiFiore for the pre-release publicity push for “Gimme Shelter.”

She said she had told the producers she would be accessible “whenever they needed me.” “They gave me an overview, but nothing they could say would ever, never - ever, a thousand times ever - (prepare her for) the amount of work and energy and time and focus that it takes to talk about a movie like this,” DiFiore said. “My God! It was grueling, definitely grueling.”

One such day: “I remember one time we were in a hotel and they had TV crews coming in to interview us. There was a light for the cameras and a clapboard. It would be like a four-minute TV interview. I was sitting with Ron (Krauss) in this large hotel room, right? And there were cameras, lights, right? And then we were told that each TV station would come in for four minutes and interview and then you’d get a 30-second break, and then the next TV station would come in and interview. The one station (that was an exception) was CNN; they got five minutes. It went on and on and on. I asked, ‘How many do they got left?’”

DiFiore and “Gimme Shelter” are among 19 movie, TV and book winners of Christopher Awards. The Christophers, sponsors of the awards - now in their 65th year - announced two special awards May 1.

Father David Link, an Indiana lawyer-turned-priest, is receiving the Father James Keller Award, named for the Christophers’ founder, for his ongoing work in prison ministry, even to the point of being ordained to the priesthood at age 71 so he could serve as a prison chaplain.

Tom Leopold, a longtime comedy writer for TV and movies, is receiving the Christopher Spirit Award. A nonpracticing Jew, Leopold became Catholic after seeking God’s help for his daughter, who was experiencing a life-threatening eating disorder. Leopold parlayed his experience into a one-man show, “A Comedy Writer Finds God.”

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