

Program on religious life debuts

TOLEDO, Ohio - Like moviegoers everywhere, the 100-plus people who filled the auditorium at WGTE-TV in Toledo on a recent evening were looking forward to the show - complete with popcorn and beverages.

But this was no ordinary "night at the movies." It was the result of two years' work and a partnership between Toledo's public television and the eight congregations of women religious who serve in the area.

The crowd gathered Jan. 17 for the premiere of "Hearts Afire," a 30-minute made-for-PBS TV program which showcases the histories, contributions and contemporary lives of Catholic sisters who have been a part of the Toledo scene for more than 160 years. The program was broadcast to the public the following night at 8 p.m. as part of the station's regular lineup.

Represented in the program are the Sisters of the Precious Blood of Dayton, Ursuline Sisters, Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of Notre Dame, Grey Nuns of Montreal, Sisters of St. Francis of Tiffin and Sylvania, and Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help of St. Louis. All of these congregations either currently serve in and/or sponsor institutions in the Toledo Diocese.

It is part of WGTE's award-winning "Toledo Stories" series, which chronicles the history and development of the city of Toledo and neighboring communities, the region's early pioneers, its ethnic richness, and the lives of individuals who have made a unique contribution to northwest Ohio.

As WGTE directors and producers brainstormed about upcoming programs, the station's president and CEO, Marlon P. Kiser, pitched the idea of a program featuring the area's Catholic sisters.

Kiser had previously served as CEO of a Catholic health care facility sponsored by an order of sisters in the Toledo Diocese. That had given him firsthand positive experience of working with and for women religious.

"Everyone (on the WGTE team) recognized the contributions Catholic sisters have

made to Toledo,” executive producer Darren LaShelle said in an interview. “They started the first hospital in Toledo, founded and ran colleges and schools. The work of sisters was well known, so a program on their lives seemed a logical choice.”

Producer Ray Miller, whose aunt is a religious sister in Pennsylvania, was chosen as the point man to establish contact with the communities. “My aunt was just ‘one of the family,’ we were very relaxed around her. So I guess I had the best comfort level going in to this,” he said.

Miller contacted Sister Virginia Welch, a Sister of St. Francis of Tiffin, who then presented the idea to the leadership of the women’s congregations, all of whom welcomed the project. The congregations formed a team to work with Miller and WGTE on the program.

“We wanted to find out what makes a woman choose this life, how sisters serve today and how they go about making a positive difference in the world around them,” he said.

“Hearts Afire” features interviews with 22 sisters.

“The sisters were open, honest, enthusiastic,” LaShelle said. “They were very willing to talk about their lives, their personal choices, what it’s like to live as a sister. ... It could have been just a clinical history, but instead the sisters made it very warm, very real.”

After 18 months of meetings, then interviews and film shoots on location at various sites, the program was ready to take shape.

Six months ago WGTE began in earnest to bring the program into production. The station secured funding and invited the congregations to also identify possible sponsors and/or contribute directly to the production costs. Then WGTE allocated staff and developed a production timeline.

The eight congregations were actively involved with the public television station throughout the process and weighed in on the final pre-broadcast cut.

The goal “was not to create a history piece,” said Sister Roberta Neff, who is also a Sister of St. Francis of Tiffin and chaired the sisters’ committee that worked with

WGTE. “Instead we wanted to show that religious life is alive and well, and to show the lives of sisters in the 21st century.”

WGTE is making “Hearts Afire” available to the seven other public television affiliates in Ohio and viewers can request other public television stations broadcast the program. While the setting is Toledo, LaShelle said, its message about women religious is appropriate fare in any geographic location.