

Documentary takes closer look at shy monk

NED ANDREW SOLOMON

When Nashville documentary filmmaker Cliff Vaughn was a boy growing up in Huntsville, Ala., he took several school field trips to the Ave Maria Grotto on the grounds of the St. Bernard Abbey.

The Grotto, a four-acre park, is home to 125 miniature buildings lovingly created by Brother Joseph Zoettl, a Benedictine monk of short stature and with a severe curvature of his upper back, who lived at the Abbey from age 14 until he died in 1961.

In October 2011 a grown up Vaughn returned to the Grotto, to see if the site was still as enchanting as he remembered it from his youth. He had hopes of making a documentary about Brother Joseph's reticent but abundantly creative time there.

He fell in love with the Grotto all over again, and approached Abbot Cletus Meagher, who approved the documentary request after Vaughn explained his interest, his background, and the research he had conducted.

"He asked if I was Catholic, and I said, no, that I was a member of First Baptist Nashville," said Vaughn. "He joked that he wouldn't hold that against me, and I appreciated that! Everyone was so helpful and I really looked forward to all of our trips down there."

Although Vaughn was determined to make a film about the Grotto, very



Brother Joseph Zoettl, a Benedictine monk who built 125 miniature replicas of famous buildings on the grounds of the Ave Maria Grotto in Alabama, is the subject of a new documentary film by Nashville based filmmaker Cliff Vaughn, pictured above, right. Here, Vaughn gets a first look at Brother Joseph's copy of St. Therese's autobiography.



little is known about its creator, besides 10 pages of autobiographical notes written in his later years. Unfortunately, these notes don't explain his motive for undertaking this huge project.

"We're kind of left with a big question mark," said Vaughn. "We do know he seemed to have a gift for making things, and a gift for creative expression. He worked in the powerhouse shoveling coal, which was a grueling

assignment. But it also gave him moments of free time when he could tinker with things, which is how he began building these miniatures."

The miniatures were made of concrete and recycled materials, like rosary beads, marbles and pieces of broken china plates. They're a mix of real structures, like St. Peter's Basilica or the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes; those that have no photographic evidence, like Noah's Ark, or the Tower of Babel; and then whimsical, imaginary scenes, like Hansel and Gretel at the Castle of the Fairies.

"Most of them are religious in nature, and are from the Holy Land or from Italy," said Vaughn. "But the vast majority of them are miniatures of things which he never saw in person. He built them based on postcards and other photographs."

In 1932, Abbot Bernard Menges asked Brother Joseph to build a large grotto at the site of the Abbey's rock quarry, which he worked on for the next two years. Dedicated in 1934, the new grotto garnered significant local Alabama media attention, which ultimately translated into coverage in Catholic publications all across the country.

As famous as his work became, Brother Joseph remained reserved and reclusive. Because of the paucity of information about the artist, the documentary makes use of several components or "narrative building blocks" to tell its story.

Vaughn was able to incorporate archival photograph, by painstakingly scanning more than 1,000 images, many of which were originally processed in St. Bernard Abbey's own photography lab. He conducted interviews with several people and included sections of the interview footage in the film.

The crew also shot some "impressionistic" re-enactments without dialogue on the Abbey grounds. These added, according to Vaughn, a "kind of old world fairy tale feel," further enhanced by the use of commissioned storybook illustrations which introduce each "chapter" of the documentary.

"I always thought of Brother Joseph's story as a true fairy tale," Vaughn said. "Not a fairy tale in the sense that it didn't happen, because it did, but it has these fairy tale components. He went on a long journey; he conducted this

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A storybook illustration by Seth Kiehl shows Brother Joseph and his recreation of the Basilica of Lourdes. Kiehl created a dozen illustrations for the documentary.

Knights host Bonanza fundraiser

Knights of Columbus Council 4972 of Donelson will host its annual Bonanza of Council 4972 fund-raiser, which features several door prizes including \$5,000 in tuition assistance for a student attending any Catholic school in the diocese, will be held at 6 p.m. Saturday, March 8.

The Bonanza is the primary fundraising event for the council's charity works throughout the year. The event also will include live and silent auctions, dinner, music and dancing.

Tickets and a chance to win the \$5,000 in tuition assistance for the purchaser and their guest cost \$125. Only 150 tickets will be sold.

For more information, contact Deputy Grand Knight and Bonanza Chairman Trey Benson at TreyBenson@comcast.net.

Carmel Center of Spirituality to host talk by

Documentary looks at shy monk

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superhuman feat; he had a stepmother who was significant in his leaving his homeland and a godmother who protected him; and the grotto and the monastery are in this wooded environment like so many fairytales. So that was the creative framework we used to tell the story."

One thing we do know is that Brother Joseph was a devotee of Saint Therese and her emphasis on humility and the "little way." He was shy and kept to himself. He demonstrated his faith quietly, but in a way that has brought joy to thousands of people for generations.

"We wanted to celebrate the humble among us, because that's part of it.

Helping children find a home

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refusing further case management, she said. But for those who do want additional guidance, more services are now available until they turn 21. The state can help former foster children pay for school and housing and stay connected with a mentor.

Cottrell assures potential adoptive parents that they will not be alone on the journey, no matter what age child they are seeking to adopt. Catholic Charities offers pre- and post-adoption training that equips

They don't celebrate themselves," said Vaughn. "I think it's incumbent upon the rest of us when we encounter someone like a Brother Joseph, to hold that up and celebrate it for what it is.

"There's a part of every person that recognizes the truth when they see it," continued Vaughn. "And when you see someone who is reflecting the truth, you can't deny it. The documentary ultimately is about people who shine a light on the truth, and Brother Joseph happens to have done it in a very creative, unique way."

For more information about the documentary, or to buy the DVD, visit brotherjosephmovie.com. A free study guide is also available for download on the website. ♣

children.

Cottrell also conducts home studies of adoptive families, helps build a team of support around the child, and facilitates initial meetings between parent and child. "We ask a ton of questions," she said, in order to find the best fit. "She couldn't have been more honest," David said of Cottrell. "She was a blessing to work with."

Even if it takes years to find the right child to adopt, the Zoccolas advise prospective parents to persevere. "Just have faith and do it," said David.

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