

Down went the coffee mug



Brian Thompson

Maybe I was in a hurry. Maybe I wasn't careful enough. Or not as careful as I usually am. The soap on my hands made the mug slick. Maybe sometimes accidents just happen and that's all there is.

Anyway, I fumbled it. Felt it slip from my grasp as fingers scrambled to catch it. The "clank" from hitting the porcelain sink in the kitchen was a sickening sound. The handle broke free, and a chip looped through the air for dramatic effect. As if to say, "Look at me! I'm flying!"

"Oh no," I gasped.

The coffee mug was dead.

Odd really, now that I think about it. I have never held any affinity for mugs. Not like others do. Put a new coffee mug on some people's desks, and you would think they were just given gold. Or a baby animal. They cherish it. Go ga-ga over it. Promise it a college fund.

I always think:

"It's a bank mug you got for opening an account! You're drinking from a billboard!"

But my mug was different. It was either a birthday or Father's Day gift with a large photo of my daughter. She must have been 4. On her head was some sort of Thanksgiving hat made from brown construction paper. It had an unidentifiable drawing that could have been a turkey, or a Pilgrim, or a spaceship. Who's to be sure?

She was wearing one of those kid grins they get when really pleased with themselves. At that moment, they don't realize they used too much glue and the hat has now permanently affixed itself to their hair. But this photo only captured the proud smile – all teeth and beaming eyes.

I hardly recognize the face on the mug anymore. She's changed so much in the 7 or 8 years I've had it. And I've taken care of that mug for that very reason. Never ran it through the dishwasher. Never let anyone else use, or even touch it. Only hand washed it. Once I even polished and buffed it.

It's treasure, and I saw myself growing old with that mug. Drinking from it until some health agency deemed it a community hazard and dispatched a special team to take it away with a specially designed tool.

Only now, after all these years, it sat shattered in my hands.

"Oh no!"

It hurt more this year than it would any other. Going off to seventh grade seemed so anticlimactic at the start of school. Like it was old hat and no big deal. Growing up has become routine. Maybe it's because the future – big scary things like high school and teen years and driving and college – don't seem like they're the future anymore. They're within easy reach. Is that why the broken mug seemed like so much more? So much pressure for a piece of glazed pottery.

"We'll get you a new one," my wife told me when she saw it.

But I'm not ready to give up on this one. I think I can rebuild it. Give it new life. I'm not ready to let go, not until the Health Department comes with their fancy tool and declares it a community hazard.



Actor Dick McMahon, who portrays Father Rene Robert in the upcoming documentary "Where There is Darkness," shoots a scene depicting the priests ministry in St. Augustine. [PHOTOS BY STELLA MAR FILMS/CONTRIBUTED]

A tale of murder and mercy

Stella Mar Films to give sneak peek of documentary of Father Rene Robert's kidnapping and murder at Epic Theatres in St. Augustine.

By Laura Hampton
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When Father Rene Robert failed to show up for a funeral he planned to officiate, people started to worry.

When the priest did not answer calls to his cellphone, friends and family began a frantic search.

When authorities spotted known criminal Steven Murray driving Robert's car, loved ones, neighbors, parishioners and riveted strangers feared the worst.

The kidnapping and murder of "Father Rene" in April 2016 sent shock waves through the St. Augustine community.

What kind of person could stuff a man of the cloth into a trunk, drive him into the Georgia woods and shoot him in the head at point-blank range?

Though it was never their intention to answer this question, independent filmmakers Sean Bloomfield and Cimela Kidonakis will shed light on the "why" of Father Rene's murder in their upcoming documentary, "Where There is Darkness."

The film, which can be seen in a sneak peek in St. Augustine on Father Rene's birthday, Sept. 2, couples live interviews with action-packed dramatizations to tell a true story of horrific tragedy and the power of forgiveness.

The Record caught up with co-director Sean Bloomfield to discuss what attracted him and Kidonakis to the story, the process they went through to capture it on film and how they were forever changed by spending time in Father Rene's world.

Q&A

A chat with Sean Bloomfield, co-director of "Where There is Darkness"

What drew you to this film project?

I live in Florida, and Cimela is from Texas. I had always told her how much I love St. Augustine. When she heard about (Father Rene on NPR), she told me about it and we started looking into it. It seemed like a story that needed to be told, so we started documenting it.

What was the first step in telling this story?

The first interviews we did were kind of exploratory. I reached out to the bishop (Bishop of St. Augustine Felipe J. Estévez), and he was very receptive to us coming up. We met with him and also the sheriff (Sheriff David Shoar). We interviewed both of them and were even more fascinated by the case. We ended up spending a lot of time with the detectives who were on the case. They led us to Steven Murray's family – especially his sisters. It's kind of like branching out – from each person you interview you follow the story from there.

As independent filmmakers, how did you finance the project?

We just kind of boot-strapped it with what we could come up with. We pretty much used all the profits from our last movie in making this, and then we also did a crowd-fund more recently for post-production costs, which



Co-director Sean Bloomfield films a scene for the documentary "Where There is Darkness" with actor Eric Newcombe, who portrays Steven Murray.

are pretty high. Our total budget was probably \$120,000.

Can you talk a little about the filming? Was it smooth?

(In addition to interviews), we've also done a lot of re-enactments. We had a full crew for those shoots. We feel really good about those because they help illustrate the story, so it's not just a film where people are talking. There's a lot of action and investigation; it's a pretty fast-paced movie – in a good way. With the re-enactments, the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office was amazing. They gathered a swat team for us because we needed to re-enact the capture of Steven Murray, and the hunt for him in the woods. Even though that happened up north, the sheriff's office had their squad guys put patches over their insignia, so we were able to film that around St. Augustine in the woods. The car chase, which did happen in St. Augustine, we re-enacted that with the sheriff's office as well. Those shoots were surprisingly good. Even though there were a lot of moving parts and a lot of people involved, they turned out really well. We also did a lot of more happy re-enactments of what Father Rene meant to the community.

What have you learned about Father Rene during this process?

The thing that we loved learning was the fact that he was so unique. He almost had a radical faith, which a lot of people would look at as naive in some cases. But at the same time, he was so selfless. It was amazing for us to see how many people he helped. We're constantly getting comments through our website. We hear so many stories that involved him, and it's amazing how many people he helped. Father Gillespie from San Sebastian (Catholic Church), whom we interviewed a lot, had some good quotes about how people look at saints from the past as these perfect people. That's what the history books remember them as, but as Father Gillespie says, "they weren't perfect people." In the same way, Father Rene wasn't perfect. That's the human side of him that people will be able to connect with after our film. We also go into some of his funny quirks. We would see these themes throughout all the interviews. People would say the



Actors Eric Newcombe (portraying Steven Murray) and Dick McMahon (portraying Father Rene Robert) film a scene from "Where There is Darkness" in downtown St. Augustine."

same things. One of them was how much he loved cheese. He would put it on everything, even things that seemed like it didn't need cheese. We also heard how he would bug people about recycling to the point that it would really annoy them. He insisted they had to recycle, and he'd dig through their trash and stuff. Those are just funny quirks that are on the side of this beautiful ministry he had.

What was it like interviewing Steven Murray?

We didn't meet face-to-face, but we talked to him on the phone several times. We found out a lot of things that nobody knows because this was after his hearing and his sentencing when he was able to be a lot more open about what happened. It is strange. When we started this film, we wanted to make a film about Father Rene's mercy and the unique part of the 'Declaration of Life' that he signed, which ended up preventing Steven from getting the death penalty. But looking at the case, we were like, how do we make a film where this guy, this murderer, that seems like a total monster with no remorse and then Father Rene is this perfect person. How does that make a good story? But then, the more we delved into it, the more we met people and talked to people, we found not only the very human side of Father Rene, but also the very human side of Steven Murray. A lot of people might not know the extent of the amount of abuse he suffered. It's not an excuse for what he did, but the amount of abuse that he went through ... it's mind-boggling that he's even still alive, honestly. Like

one of the detectives said, "I don't believe Steven Murray was born; I believe he was made." We go into that (in the movie); it's kind of a side story.

Does your film take a stand on the death penalty?

We didn't want to be pro- or anti-death penalty, or make some political statement. That's not what we're trying to do with this, so we leave it up to the viewer. At the same time, I think people will go into it and at first, feel that anger that everybody did. But, I think at the end, people will feel a bit more sympathy, and maybe see (Murray) in the way that Father Rene saw him, despite Steven's flaws.

Why did you choose St. Augustine for the sneak peek?

It's where Father Rene lived and where the film is set, but more than that, we chose St. Augustine because of the amazing support we got from the Catholic parishes – from the priest and the bishop – but also from the sheriff's office and all the residents that knew Father Rene. They were just so welcoming to us and that was just such a beautiful thing – that Southern hospitality.

What do you hope audiences get out of the film?

I would say a few things – like judging people less is a big one. Father Rene did not judge people. That's one thing that we learned about him – just how open he was to people of different backgrounds and beliefs. Cimela and I talk about it all the time. We didn't think we judged people. We're pretty open-minded, but this project has had a big effect on our actions. Through the process of making this film, we judge people less.