

PRINCETON: 'Redemption': Making a movie about justice restored

By Michael Redmond Lifestyle Editor

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In the Princeton offices of Centurion Ministries, the three partners producing 'Redemption,' a feature film on the prison ordeal of Joyce Ann Brown -- clockwise from top: Joe Seldner, Jim McCloskey and Jay Regan.

Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

On Saturday at the Millennium 2000 Gallery in Dallas, friends and supporters of Joyce Ann Brown will be celebrating the 20th anniversary of her release from prison, where she had served nine years of a life sentence for a robbery and murder she had nothing to do with.

It's the kind of case one would like to believe could never happen in the Land of the Free, but they do happen, shockingly often.

Ms. Brown has told her story in "Joyce Ann Brown: Justice Denied" (1990), co-written with Jay Gaines. Now three gentlemen from Princeton — James C. McCloskey,

Jay Regan and Joe Seldner — have joined forces to put her story out there as “Redemption,” a fact-based feature film.

One doubts that Jim McCloskey needs much of an introduction to Princeton area readers. Founder and director of Centurion Ministries, with offices on Witherspoon Street, Mr. McCloskey and his associates have been fighting for “the imprisoned innocent” since 1983. Ms. Brown’s case is one of Centurion’s approximately 40 victories, all of which have come hard.

Mr. McCloskey, who describes himself as “the missionary to the despised,” was well on his way to becoming a Presbyterian pastor when a student chaplaincy at Trenton State Prison redirected his steps. Born of its founder’s faith, Centurion Ministries is nonetheless a “purely secular” and independent not-for-profit agency (centurionministries.org).

Mr. McCloskey has been approached by film projects before, but he became involved with this one because “I came to know Joe (Seldner),” he says.

“Joe had been after me for years, and this just seemed to be the right time. I’d like the public to really see and feel the criminal justice system in this country as we (at Centurion) experience it. Innocent people are being wrongfully convicted, and this happens far more often than we would like to think. And I think Joyce’s story should serve as an inspiration to people not to lock down their futures.”

“Redemption” is being produced by Harbourton Entertainment, a partnership spun off by Jay Regan from his investment banking firm, Harbourton Enterprises. Mr. Regan is chairman of Centurion Ministries’ board, where a fellow board member, William Sword Jr., brought him together with Mr. Seldner. Bill Sword and Joe Seldner had attended junior high school together. That’s how local this story gets.

“Jay was excited by the idea of an independently produced feature film,” Mr. McCloskey says, “and he was willing to head up attracting financial interest and support. We still have a long way to go, but if this thing gets done and gets done right, I think it will be like hitting the lottery. I’m excited by our prospects.”

In August, the project officially surfaced within the film industry when the Hollywood Reporter and other trade publications reported that Brian Dennehy, the Golden Globe and Tony Award winning actor, has agreed to make his film-directing debut with “Redemption,” which he is co-writing with Mr. Seldner. It’s a big step forward. Brian Dennehy commands a lot of respect.

“We know this story has gravitas,” says Joe Seldner during a chat at Panera on Nassau Street. “With Brian Dennehy aboard, we know that we have access to A List actors. It’s a great story, with four or five really meaty roles. I think what Dennehy likes about the story is the challenge an experience like Joyce’s has to a person’s faith. And people are interested in the project. Philip Seymour Hoffman’s agent called to say they want to see the script.”

As of now, "Redemption" is a \$9 million project. "Twenty years ago, that was a lot of money," Mr. Seldner says. "Today people say it's a low-budget film."

Jay Regan, who describes himself as "the anchor investor," chuckles as he says, "They say the craziest people in the world want to make a movie or open a restaurant. But at the bottom of the Great Depression, movies did very well. Sure, the business is tough, but we have a compelling story to tell, and the success of the movie would be an important success for Centurion, on a number of levels."

Mr. Regan says he will soon be wrapping up a business plan "that will lay everything out, with all the financials, right from Dollar 1, including box office, foreign distribution, DVDs, and so on." He and Mr. Seldner are already talking to potential investors and working with agents on the West Coast.

While "Princeton isn't exactly the center of the entertainment universe," it's a great place to grow up in and a great place to return to, Mr. Seldner he says — which he did in 1996, in order to raise two children. He recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of his graduation from PHS. Now both of his kids are PHS graduates. This kind of thing doesn't happen all that often in Beverly Hills.

The Web site of Mr. Seldner's company, Seldner Media & Entertainment, provides the scoop on a wide- ranging career that began with a stint as a lowly reporter with the Denver Post ("as an ex-journalist I'm attracted to fact-based stories," he says), to working as a creative executive to Tom Hanks at Disney, co-producer of the HBO baseball flick "61*" (2001), directed by Billy Crystal, and of "Ripley's Believe It or Not," a film on the life of Robert Ripley currently in pre-production at Paramount (it's expected that Jim Carrey will star).

The Princeton Film Foundation/Tigervision, where he has taught, describes Mr. Seldner as "a veteran entertainment executive." Some Princetonians might consider that an unusually warm encomium for a Yale MBA.

Shooting for "Redemption" may start as early as spring 2010.

Joyce Ann Brown's story, as summarized by Northwestern Law:

"Joyce Ann Brown was convicted of a 1980 murder in Dallas based on testimony from a witness who identified her from a photograph.

"Ms. Brown had become a suspect when police learned that a car used in the crime had been rented by someone named Joyce Ann Brown. Unfortunately, the Joyce Ann Brown who rented the car and the Joyce Ann Brown whom the police arrested were different persons.

"An eyewitness erroneously identified the one who had been arrested, and that Joyce Ann Brown was charged with the crime. Before trial, police and prosecutors discovered

the error but proceeded with the prosecution anyway.

“Brown was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. After an investigation by Jim McCloskey of Centurion Ministries and an exposé by CBS “Sixty Minutes,” Brown’s conviction was reversed because police and prosecutors had failed to turn over exculpatory evidence in their possession. All charges were dismissed in 1990.”

For more information about Ms. Brown and the social service agency she founded to assist prisoners and their families, visit massjab.org.
