

Local Documentary Filmmakers Tackle Poverty in Newark for a National Audience

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NEWARK, NJ — When the documentary filmmaker duo Jerome and Marylou Bongiorno trained their lens on poverty in Newark, they did it not just to spotlight a serious socio-economic issue.

The husband and wife team want to use their camera as a tool to take down a plague that has blighted the city for decades.

"We put all our frustrations into our films. You have to get the message out about a range of issues, including poverty," said Marylou Bongiorno in advance of the release of "[Rust](#)," the third in a series of documentaries about Newark that she and her husband created that look into the complexities of the place where they live and work. "We have to get serious about something that is a serious problem."

The Bongornos have been taking a penetrating look at Newark's problems for more than 15 years. *Rust* is the final part of a trilogy the filmmakers call the "three R's." The first, "Revolution '67," looked at the people and phenomena that led to the 1967 civil unrest — to some a riot, to others a rebellion — which left Newark physically and psychologically scarred.

The second, "The Rule," examined life inside St. Benedict's Preparatory School, a place where an educational model rooted in respect, discipline, and healing provides a paragon for effective urban education that plants the seeds for civic solutions. "Rust" builds on the first two films to find ways to deal with poverty in Newark, which has a poverty rate of around 27%, according to recent U.S. Census figures.

"Poverty is a toxin. It gets in your blood," said Jerome Bongiorno, noting that the economic stress of poverty can exacerbate existing physical and mental illnesses such as obesity, hypertension, depression, and anxiety. "It wears down your defenses."

In "Rust," the Bongornos propose going on the offensive, with the war on poverty to be fought on three fronts.

"First, you've got to create an educational system that's tailored to the need of these inner-city kids, who often grow up in dangerous environments," Jerome Bongiorno said. "Second, you've got to help inner-city families stay together. Kids need stability, and they need both parents. Third, people need full-time jobs and to get paid a living wage. It's essential for the local economy, and it's essential to their community."

"And if you reduce racism, then you close the median wealth gap that we're seeing," added Marylou Bongiorno, "If you don't close that equity gap, you're reducing the opportunities to stop the cycle of poverty."

The Bongornos believe that there are real-time solutions to poverty that are already present in Newark that are based on practicality, not philosophy.

"Why aren't public schools in Newark changing their model to become more like St. Benedict's Prep? It works. Do it," said Jerome Bongiorno, noting that counseling for students comprises part of the school's educational plan. "We have to create schools that work, and the answer is here."

The Bongornos also put forward the premise that a major government initiative, such as the New Deal under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1930s, could play a major role in fighting poverty. It could also ultimately direct funding to those who truly need it in a changing Newark.

"If you only improve downtown, how is money going to get to the poor people? It's not," he said. "If people aren't getting an education, they're not going to get those downtown corporate jobs. The only way to revitalize Newark is to reduce poverty, which will reduce crime, help improve schools through the model we talk about, and give people a real chance at higher-paying jobs. Then having more economic power will help people get more politicians to have the will to back them up."

"Rust" has some high-profile people in it to help get the message out. Lawrence Hamm of the People's Organization for Progress, Renee Boynton Jarrett of Boston University's School of Medicine, Khalil Gibran Muhammad of the Harvard Kennedy School, and former New Jersey Gov. Jim McGreevey, who now runs the non-profit New Jersey Reentry Corporation, all appear in the film.

The Newark Regional Business Partnership and Prudential Financial are sponsoring a virtual screening and discussion about the film on Monday, May 3 at 7 p.m., moderated by Shané Harris, Vice President of Corporate Responsibility at Prudential Financial and Executive Director of The Prudential Foundation.

"Rust" will ultimately have a high-profile national platform when it [premieres on PBS on May 18](#).

But for the Bongornos, simple social interactions, hopefully soon returned to routine as COVID vaccinations rise and the pandemic abates, will also make a difference in the fight against poverty in Newark.

"When you're out in the world again, you have to stay serious and steadfast when you talk about poverty. And when people see that you're serious, they'll jump on your bandwagon," Jerome Bongiorno said. "It's the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do, and it can be done."

You can find out more information about "Rust" and [sign up for the May 3 virtual screening, here](#).

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