

Common Threads

Filmmaker and former NH resident Amber Ward debuts film at Southern New Hampshire University

◆ **Professional ties:** Documentary focuses on two Granite State psychotherapists who share stories of their own childhood abuses.

By **JULIA ANN WEEKES**
NH Weekend Editor

Though he has spent a career counseling patients with traumatic pasts, Granite State psychotherapist Marcel Duclos waited nearly six decades to publicly share his own history of childhood abuse.

The result of that uncomfortable revelation, which came about five years ago when Duclos and colleague Connie Robillard began writing their book "Common Threads: Stories of Life After Trauma," is a new documentary spearheaded by filmmaker Amber Ward, a former Nashua resident now living in Minneapolis.

The feature-length documentary, presented by New Hampshire-based Shadow Lane Productions in association with In The Safe Place Seminars, will make its debut in a 7 p.m. showing Saturday, Sept. 15, at Southern New Hampshire University's Frost Hall in Manchester.

"We started filming two years ago," said Ward, who graduated from the Visual Communications Program in Alberta, Canada, as well as the Vancouver Film School in British Columbia. "It's been a long process. We're excited to be done and have people see it.

"I definitely learned a lot," she said. "It was something I was

unfamiliar with. Just listening to Connie's and Marcel's stories . . . it opened my mind up and helped me to understand" the reasons that people get trapped in abusive relationships.

Robillard, 64, and Duclos, 68, both of whom provide therapy through Eventide Counseling Service's Concord and Londonderry offices, said sharing their own experiences on camera was a difficult, if healing, endeavor.

"I'm a very private person and I did not want to make this about me," Duclos said. "It has to do with the necessity of breaking the veil of secrecy that is involved in any kind of abuse — that collusion of secrecy that occurs in families and society."

The therapists' book had dealt with the long-term effects of emotional and physical abuse, but made use of art, poetry and short stories to take readers into the lives of frightened children and their journeys into adulthood. The film, however, would more obviously put the spotlight on the counselors' own painful pasts.

"It was difficult going through the process," Robillard said. "It was really hard. It reawakens all the stuff from the past . . . touches on emotions and brings up memories." Robillard, who said her abuse began at about 3 years old, confronted her abuser when she was 20.

"What I now believe as a therapist is that it's a dangerous thing to do because you don't know what you will get back from an abuser; that person was given another opportunity to blame me," she said. "In the old days of therapy, confronting an abuser used to be considered therapeutic, but now all the literature and also my personal experience and as a therapist says there are other ways to do it. It's a dangerous thing to do and can re-traumatize a person."

But, for Robillard, one of the most unsettling aspects of writing their book and then filming the documentary came as Duclos spoke about the abuse he suffered beginning at the age of 9.

"It was painfully shocking for me because he had been my professor at school in 1978 at New Hampshire Technical Institute in Concord," Robillard said. "I had him on a pedestal and thought he had everything together and was just fine. We've worked together as therapists (in their own practice and for other agencies) and to find out this man who is so brilliant had



Connie Robillard and Marcel Duclos appear in former Nashua filmmaker Amber Ward's documentary "Common Threads."

all these problems. It was shocking, and it was healing for me at the same time."

Robillard, an educator in the Human Service Program at New Hampshire Technical College in Nashua and case worker and counselor for Nashua Community Council, Gateway Family Health Center and Adoptive Families for Children, inadvertently learned about Duclos' early struggles when editing material for their book.

"In fact, he didn't tell me," she recalled. "I was editing the book at the same time we were writing it and all of a sudden I get to this horrible autobiographical piece about trauma, and I'm reading it in shock and dismay."

But, she said, Duclos' nonchalance in not mentioning the subject matter of that particular article was typical of those who experience abuse. "Traumatized people don't realize how horrible their story is until another person hears about it or reads about it and is shocked by it, because we all get desensitized by our own pain."

Duclos, who contends his abuse pales in comparison with many of his patients' traumatic childhoods, found many of long-buried

memories and emotions of his youth were unearthed as he used personal experiences to help craft an artistic, educational publication about courage, resiliency and the ability to heal.

"The experiences that I had basically had gone underground and been left there for decades," he said. "What I've encountered in terms of abandonment or abuse is minor or miniscule compared to countless stories I've heard in my office. There are folks that have had horrendous betrayals, and not only minimized it but acted as if it never happened and lived with the weight of the absorbed guilt of perpetrators inside themselves."

Duclos, who has held faculty appointments at New Hampshire Technical Institute for 28 years and is former executive director of Headrest Inc. in Lebanon, said it was only when he began to work on "Common Threads" that his own walls of defense began to unravel.

"Once I began writing, I began to relive, remember and recall — not that I had forgotten them but they had been put away," he said. "The writing of the book as a creative experience brought that back and gave me opportunity for reflection and understanding. It's autobiographical but not an autobiography. It was one step, but being interviewed on film is a whole other story, and I have a whole lot of internal resistance to doing that. It's very public. I realized in being interviewed for the film, I'm way more discreet and circumspect."

Ward, who plans to submit her screen version of "Common

Threads" into national film festivals this year, said that throughout the project she was acutely aware of Duclos' reluctance in revealing intimate details about his life.

"Connie was a lot easier to interview than Marcel because he would talk about other things, steer away from some questions," Ward said. "But (in the end) they trusted me and became like family to me, which is a help when you are telling secrets to people you don't even know."

When asked what they hope the film will accomplish, Robillard said, simply, "I hope *hope* happens, that people have the experience that I had with Marcel, that they go, 'Wow, all these years, she's been so helpful to me, or done this or that with her life. If she can do that, I can work through my own trauma and do something with my life as well.'" Part of that process is understanding how abuse happens, and how wide-reaching its effects can be.

"I talk about discovered abandonment, which happened to me when I was very young because of my mother's illness and my grandmother's death, which set a pattern for me," Duclos said. "I was probably nine years old — it was a neighbor. It's somebody you know and have confidence in."

The physical assault, he said, was compounded by an overwhelming sense of "betrayal, treachery and then extortion.

"There's a form of terrorism in it and tyranny. I think often times how currently we talk about the War on Terror and I chuckle inside and get incensed at the same time. There's more terror in our neighborhoods than terror way out there. We don't have to go far to find it. Go the grocery store on a Saturday morning and spend an hour looking at the families and kids, and you will see instances of child abuse. I remember picking up my kids in my arms and leaving a full basket there once. I couldn't take it and I didn't know why, what it was that was getting to me."

Finding the "Common Threads" in people's lives — whether it's struggles with addiction or abuse — helps people face the choices they continue to make.

"It tests my courage to simply let it be seen," Duclos said of the film's premier.

◆ Tickets to the screening, at which Robillard and Duclos will be in attendance, are \$10 in advance at Presale tickets www.eventidecounseling.com, or \$12 at the door.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE CIRELLI

FILMMAKER AMBER WARD

Spotlight on
New Hampshire

