

Tenafly filmmaker's documentary looks at a famous North Jersey culture-war case

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Tenafly filmmaker Vic Losick, center, interviews student Matthew LaClair for his documentary 'In God We Teach.'

WHAT: "In God We Teach."

WHEN: 7 p.m. Saturday, with "After the Fire."

WHERE: New Jersey Film Festival 732-932-8482 or njfilmfest.com.

Odd thing, public opinion. Different publics have different opinions — and the winner of a debate can depend on the arena where it takes place.

"In God We Teach," a documentary about a famous 2006 culture-war case that screens Saturday at the 30th annual New Jersey Film Festival, Fall 2011 (Friday to Oct. 27, Rutgers University, New Brunswick), is about two such arenas.

One is the town of Kearny, which gave the hands-down victory to a popular public high school teacher accused in 2006 of force-feeding Christian propaganda to his students. "Jesus did everything in his power to make sure that you could go to heaven," he can be heard saying on tape, in response to a question. " ... If you reject that, you belong in hell."

For many parents and officials in this conservative-leaning town, caught on camera in [Tenafly](#) filmmaker Vic Losick's 62-minute film, this makes teacher David Paszkiewicz both a hero and a victim. Student Matthew LaClair, who secretly tape-recorded him, was a "troublemaker." He was ostracized, bullied, threatened.

Round Two was fought in the national media — where LaClair and his family went after the Kearny school board

refused to respond to their complaints. Here, the story played out very differently.

LaClair was seen as a courageous First Amendment champion, lionized by Anderson Cooper and the Hayden Planetarium's Neil deGrasse Tyson. Meanwhile, Paszkiewicz was pilloried on national TV as an ignoramus, a dangerous fanatic who had no business teaching in a public school.

End of story? Not quite. Filmmaker Losick saw certain ambiguities in the episode that made it ideal for a documentary. "I didn't want to do a polemic, I didn't want to preach to the choir," he says.

To be sure, he has definite feelings about the separation of church and state. "I think there needs to be a big separation," he says.

At the same time, the nature of that separation has been re-argued and re-fought for years, and the lines are constantly shifting. "I sang the Lord's Prayer in the [Tenafly](#) school system, and we read the psalms," says the 67-year-old Losick. "Now it's totally changed. What I realized from this whole thing is that there's no one ruling that defines the separation of church and state. Each case has to be judged on its own merits."

A parallel case, shown in the film, speaks precisely to this matter: a California history teacher accused by conservatives of sneaking an anti-Christian message into his lessons (he used the phrase "Jesus glasses" to refer to the reactionary viewpoint the medieval church tried to foist on peasants). To what extent must teachers muzzle

themselves?

Over 18 months Losick, a longtime documentary filmmaker ("Last Dance") and producer (TV's "60 Minutes"), shot more than 100 hours of material for his \$100,000 film. But his real coup was securing the cooperation of one of the key players. Paszkiewicz (he still teaches in Kearny) had mostly shunned the media in the months following the uproar. But Losick's promise to be evenhanded won him over.

"I think he kept his promise," Paszkiewicz says. "I thought it was as evenhanded as it could be from somebody from his perspective. He's not a conservative, and he doesn't define himself as an evangelical Christian, and he said he was going to go down the middle."

Meanwhile LaClair, now a student at the New School in New York, has been propelled by his fame to a bully pulpit on New York's WBAI-FM (99.5 FM) radio, where his show "Equal Time for Freethought" airs at 3 p.m. Saturdays.

He, too, praises Losick's fairness in giving equal time to both sides. Which is not to say, he adds, that both sides have an equally good argument.

"Pretty much all the experts agree this teacher went over the line," LaClair says.

Losick will be appearing in person at the screening.