

## Lessons Not Learned

By ANTHONY STOECKERT September 7, 2011

You know that old rule about not talking about religion or politics in polite conversation? Well, Vic Losick says forget it. His new documentary, “In God We Teach,” delves into a story that’s all about religion and politics, along with perceptions of freedom of speech and the privacy of a classroom.

The movie will be screened on Sept. 10 as part of the New Jersey Film Festival at Rutgers. The festival is celebrating its 30th anniversary with a slate of nearly 50 movies, features, full-length documentaries and short subjects, Sept. 9 through Oct. 27. Many screenings will feature appearances from filmmakers, including Losick.

The movie tells the story of Matthew LaClair, a student at Kearny High School who in 2006 recorded his social studies teacher David Paszkiewicz expressing his Christian faith. The most damning quote LaClair captured was Paszkiewicz saying that Jesus took on our sins and suffered pain for us. “And he’s saying, ‘Please, accept me, believe.’ If you reject that, you belong in hell.” The school board didn’t punish Paszkiewicz but it did ban recording in classrooms. The incident sparked national media coverage by outlets such as The New York Times and Anderson Cooper’s CNN show. It also led to debates about church and state, but also if LaClair crossed a line by recording his teacher (and, therefore, his classmates). Based on the film, the overwhelming majority of students and parents in the town supported the teacher.

One scene in the movie was recorded at a Kearny Board of Education meeting and shows a speaker named Nick Lento, who professes his Christian faith but says the district can't allow talk like this in a class and that if the case ever went to the Supreme Court, even Justices Scalia and Thomas would rule against them. He is roundly booed, then asks the crowd if Jesus would have booed him. Losick says he was able to get just one active teacher at Kearny - Dr. Robert Fried, who has since retired - to speak with him on record. He also talked with a retired teacher, Jeremy Spampinato, who criticized Paszkiewicz, saying that evangelizing was more important to him than teaching.

“As a documentary filmmaker I’m always looking for a story and this caught my eye,” Losick says. “When I met with the LaClairs for the first time, with Matthew, and we were talking about his recordings, I said, you know he’s obviously crossed the line here, I really don’t think there’s much here for a documentary.” Then LaClair’s father, Paul, handed him a letter Paszkiewicz wrote to the local newspaper. In the letter, Paszkiewicz wrote that the Constitution does not contain the words “separation of church and state” and that the founders did not intend for religion to never be discussed in public life. He quotes Thomas Jefferson and George Washington professing their Christian faith, including this quote often attributed to Washington: “What students would learn in American schools above all is the religion of Jesus Christ.” “I thought, wow this is interesting,” Losick says. “A high school teacher defending his position and citing Jefferson and Washington and Franklin and all that stuff and I thought, Well this might have the makings of a good documentary, which is always a fateful thing to say to oneself and off we went.”

Losick, 67, grew up in Tenafly and, in his words, “attended public schools from kindergarten to Rutgers.” His film work has included working as a cameraman on acclaimed documentaries like “The

September Issue” and “Waiting for Superman.” He’s also worked on “American Masters” documentaries about Clint Eastwood and Ella Fitzgerald. One of the most difficult things about making the movie was convincing Paszkiewicz to talk with him. It took six months of e-mails and phone calls before finally getting the teacher to agree to an interview. “I said, ‘Look I think I have the average comprehension of church and state and now you’re saying all these other things,’” Losick says. “Let’s put all the arguments on the table, I want to hear all your arguments, and we’ll talk about it. And I will go down the middle of the road and show both sides.’ And I think that’s what I’ve done, to some degree. There are limitations. I did not want to produce a polemic, I did not want to, excuse the expression, preach to the choir, because I thought, Well maybe there’s something here I don’t understand.”

While Losick is a proud progressive, his movie seems balanced, and the reactions from the two central figures are interesting. Losick doesn’t agree with what Paszkiewicz did and especially fears the intrusion of religion on science. But in a clip on the movie’s website (filmed after a screening) Paszkiewicz says he was treated fairly by Losick, even though he feared a Michael Moore-like attack. On the other hand, Losick, says LaClair had complaints that the movie made him look like an instigator, to which Losick replied, You are an instigator. Not that Losick takes it easy on Paszkiewicz, especially during a section where he talks about originally denying using the word “belong” in the classroom, then being confronted with the recordings.

The director immersed himself in this story to make his movie. He attended school board meetings, interviewed students and that one teacher who talked with him. No one from the Board of Education would speak with him, however, and he says he was chased away from the school by police while interviewing students. He also talked to people LaClair encountered during this controversy, prominent people like Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden

Planetarium, Alan Dershowitz, the noted lawyer and Harvard professor and Kenneth Miller, a biology professor at Brown. He also spoke with LaClair's parents, but says no one from Paszkiewicz's inner circle agreed to sit before his cameras.

How LaClair and Paszkiewicz come off in the movie likely depends on one's personal views. During an interview, Losick is most critical of the Kearny Board of Education. By not addressing the issue right, he says the Board cost the town \$125,000. But for the director, the real crime was not using the controversy as a "teachable moment."

One question that remains unanswered is what led to Paszkiewicz's quote about nonbelievers are going to hell. Did LaClair ask a question that led to it or was the teacher proselytizing? Even listening to the tapes in full, Losick says, doesn't answer the question.

Today, LaClair is a senior at the New School and Paszkiewicz is still teaching. Both attended a screening, which Losick says got boisterous and found the two men getting bogged down in the same arguments. As a result, he's asked them not to appear at the NJ Film Fest Screening. He says he thinks LaClair was more shocked by the movie. "In God We Teach" shows him talking about being bullied as a kid and while things got better in high school, he was still an outcast. Taking up this case against a well-liked teacher only made him less popular. "I think Matthew was shocked more than anyone else," Losick says, "because I think Matthew saw this film as his sort of running into town on a white horse, and people were just as angry at him before."