

Healing power, by design

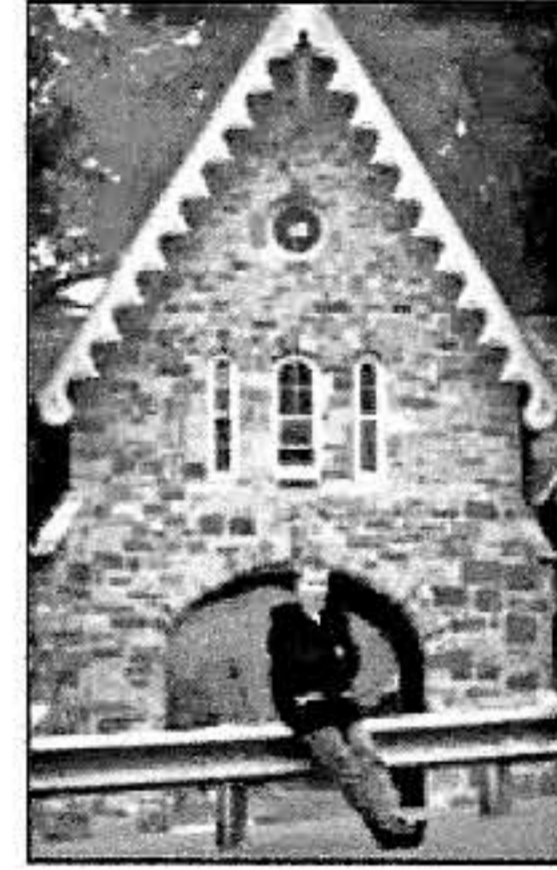
Film documents role of architecture at Pratt

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Story By Lisa DeNike

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Shown at the gatehouse at Sheppard Pratt, Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Richard Chisolm created a documentary film about the architecture and setting of the hospital grounds. The film debuts June 2.

As much as the quality of its treatment, the architecture and setting of the Sheppard Pratt Hospital serve as identifying features of the facility within the community.

Next week, the health system will play host to the premiere of a film documenting how that unique, mid-19th-century architecture and design transcended bricks and mortar and set a new standard as a key component in the treatment of mental illness.

Titled "The Building of a Sanctuary," the 30-minute film explores the relationship between the architects and physicians who turned Quaker philanthropist Moses Sheppard's vision into reality.

Filmmaker Richard Chisolm, a Roland Park resident who won an 1998 Emmy Award for television cinematography for his work on a National Geographic special, shot and co-produced the documentary.

Produced by Historic Towson Inc., the film will be screened at 7:30 p.m. Monday, June 2, at the health system's Conference Center, 6501 N. Charles St.

"First and foremost, the film is an attempt to preserve and to document the hospital's philosophy that place matters in healing and in helping to alleviate mental illness," said Carol Allen, president of Historic Towson, Inc. and the film's executive producer.

"But it's also about preserving the human connection with the past at Sheppard," she added, "which we did by talking to people who worked there or were treated there in the early years."

Allen conceived the idea for the project, though she had never made a film before.

Nevertheless, over the course of four years, she managed not only to hire Chisolm to shoot the project, but also to raise the funds needed to make it happen.

"Here comes Carol Allen, who is essentially a passionate, earnest person, a preserver, a historian, who has the flame of an idea and the tenacity to push it through, though no idea how to go about it," said Chisolm.

"Basically," he added, "what we did was work together, piece by piece, to make this thing happen and to make it happen right."

Though Chisolm calls the film's \$60,000 budget "exceedingly modest," he believes the end result possesses the kind of polish and elegance found in films whose makers had triple that amount _ or more _ to spend.

"Yes, it was hard working within our budget constraints, because Carol would write a grant and get some money and then we would film and then we'd stop because we ran out of money," Chisolm said.

"But this is my favorite kind of project, because it is a very creative and organic process where I and others like me are able to help a person with a passion _ in this case, Carol _ translate her idea into a film with an important message."

That message _ that Sheppard Pratt's homey architecture and rolling green landscape marked a turning point in the way mental illness was treated _ is told through vintage photographs of the asylum's grounds and patients during its early years, and also through the voices of several patients, administrators and board members who spent time there.