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Documentary celebrates New Hope's open culture

By Julia Terruso
Inquirer Staff Writer



TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer
A documentary about New Hope, "Embraceable You," was created by resident Geri Delevich (in vest) with her partner, Marilyn Cichowski, and Doug Keith (center). They chat with neighbors Devon Neubauer (black T-shirt) and Terry Marks (right)

Three hundred years ago, Quaker discipline forbade "outward expressions of creativity" by settlers in New Hope. Today, the community is arguably the most expressive, chic, and funky haven on the Delaware River.

AmericanStyle magazine rates New Hope the most artsy among U.S. small towns, and residents relish their borough's blend of tradition and diversity.

Now, an award-winning documentary is aiming to spread the word that this hip artists' colony is a great place to visit and an even better place to call home.

"We have a 300-year-old doormat that says, 'Come as you are and stay that way,' " said longtime resident Geri Delevich, who launched the *Embraceable You* project in 2007 with her partner, Marilyn Cichowski, as coproducer.

Delevich's mission was to create a film chronicling New Hope's history of acceptance, community, and charisma. A book of interviews compiled by Delevich and Cichowski followed, as did a CD featuring original music by 15 New Hope artists.

Embraceable You premiered in November at the Bucks County Playhouse. It has since won recognition at the Garden State Film Festival, the New Hope International Film Festival, and, most recently, in July at the Philadelphia QFest.

Delevich has lived in New Hope for 35 years. She's a longtime borough councilwoman who helped unanimously pass one of the first ordinances protecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people from discrimination in public housing or the workplace.

She taught fourth, fifth and sixth grade at Buckingham Elementary School for 35 years, often encouraging her students to use film as a means of expression. Today, many of her students live and work in town.

"I see them everywhere. I love it. And I know I was their favorite," says Delevich, a petite, energetic, white-haired woman.

That's the norm in New Hope: Residents recognize most everyone they pass, and if not, wave to them anyway. Fireworks explode over the river every Friday night, tony restaurants serve gourmet dishes, and shops offer a wide range of goods, from designer clothing and exotic spices to naughty novelties and medieval weapons.

"It's kind of like being chief in a beach or touristy town," Police Chief Michael Cummings, who appears in the documentary, said in an interview. "There's a great relationship between all of the residents here. I guess because it's a small town and you interact with people every day, and before you know it, you don't even look at those differences."

The 32-minute documentary pairs unlikely friends for interviews. Among them: a punk rocker and an octogenarian, a drag queen and a fire chief, and a tattoo artist and a hippie.

"We created the character of the town out of real people," said documentarian Doug Keith, who directed the film and is a former student of Delevich's. "None of this is scripted or forced; it's all evident in the chemistry between the two people."

Take for example, Meshell Kimbel, 40, whose pink hair (it was blue in the documentary) beckons customers to God Save the Queens, her clothing and knickknack shop.

She chats with longtime friend John Larsen, 83, at Larsen's basement bar, John & Peter's. Their age difference, Kembel says, always has enriched their friendship.

A few yards away from Larsen's bar, Michael Gardner, whose drag-queen identity is Miss Pumpkin, appears in the documentary dressed in full costume and makeup alongside Frank Cosner, who is Gardner's friend and a retired fire chief. Cosner is in uniform. ("We wanted to keep things visually interesting," Keith said.)

New Hope's acceptance and pride is the norm, Cosner says in the documentary: "It's not something we flaunt." At this, Miss Pumpkin looks down at her rainbow-collared dress and red pumps and says, "Well, we might flaunt it a little."

Community fund-raising, along with a \$30,000 grant from the Department of Community and Economic Development, paid for the nonprofit documentary project. State Sen. Chuck McIlhinney (R., Bucks) helped secure the grant to continue revitalizing the town, which in 2004 and 2006 suffered floods that devastated many riverside restaurants and businesses.

The documentary features lifelong New Hope residents and longtime fans. Roberta Heydenberk was born and raised in New Hope and now teaches at Lehigh University.

"I grew up not even understanding that there were whole groups of people who were not supposed to get along," she said.

Heydenberk recalls sharing Christmas dinners with upward of 20 people, many of whom were gay and no longer welcome in their own homes in neighboring towns.

But New Hope isn't a town where "people have to be different for differences sake," Heydenberk says.

The film might be educational. Prudential Real Estate showed it to employees, Delevich said, as part of its diversity training, and there is talk of showing it in area schools. DVDs will be available in October at up-river-productions.com

"I wanted to make a film that shows people are basically good. I wanted to show a good example of the human condition," she said. "I'm a strong believer that prejudice is on its way out."

Contact staff writer Julia Terruso at 610-313-8110 or jterruso@phillynews.com.

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