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**Today's CS&T Poll**

Which recent topic in the news is most important to you?

- The effort to rescind a proposal that would remove conscience protections for health care workers.

## Local Catholics from Deaf Apostolate star in movie filmed in Philadelphia



CAPTIONED FOR THE HEARING — Filmed in Philadelphia, “Universal Signs” stars Sabrina Lloyd and Anthony Natale, above, and features many Philadelphia Catholics.

By **Christie L. Chicoine**  
CS&T Staff Writer

GLENSIDE — The film’s writer and director, members of the deaf apostolate of the Philadelphia Archdiocese, a Sister of St. Joseph and a number of parishioners from our Lady of Ransom Parish in Northeast Philadelphia are among the many familiar faces area Catholics will see at this weekend’s premiere of “Universal Signs,” an independent film presented in American Sign Language with English subtitles.

Tickets are available for two screenings — the first, a matinee at 1 p.m. and the second at 7 p.m. — Saturday, May 30, at the Keswick Theatre in Glenside.

The film chronicles a deaf artist’s journey, played by Anthony Natale, following the death of his fiancée’s daughter while in his care.

“Universal Signs is a spiritual experience,” said writer and director Ann Calamia, a member of Old St. Joseph’s Parish in Philadelphia. Through the themes of forgiveness, connection, love and redemption, the movie illustrates how people can relate to each other, regardless of invisible differences, she said.

“It celebrates Catholicism in a beautiful light,” added Calamia, who was raised in St. Jude Parish in Chalfont, Bucks County, where she attended the parish elementary school and parish religious education program.

She believes Catholic viewers will appreciate certain symbolic aspects of the film, such as the rain in the film which represents baptism and the washing away of sins.

For a scene shot in February 2006 at Our Lady of Ransom Church in particular, Calamia tapped the expertise of a priest she knows well — Msgr. James P. McCoy, the pastor of St. Jude Parish. He officiated at Calamia’s May 1, 1999 wedding to Eric Rohrbaugh.

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- Journalist Chris Matthews' invitation as commencement speaker and honoree at St. Joseph's University.
- Relief efforts for victims of the earthquake in Italy.
- Commemoration of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus during the Church's Sacred Triduum and Easter Sunday.
- Heritage of Faith-Vision of Hope, the Archdiocesan capital campaign.

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"I wanted to make sure that I was accurate and really represented the Catholic Church in a positive light," she said. "That was really important to me because it is my faith, it is part of my moral upbringing. Because of that, I wanted to make sure that it was a film that when Catholics see it, they feel connected to it, and feel that it's a positive representation of all the wonderful messages and morals that [the Church has] to offer."

"Universal Signs" won the Philadelphia Film Festival Audience Award for best feature film in 2008.

The film gets a thumbs up from the archdiocesan Department for Pastoral Care for Persons With Disabilities and from the Deaf Apostolate.

"The thrilling thing about this film is viewing the excitement of the deaf community as they witness their language, American Sign Language, and aspects of their culture and experience receiving recognition and exposure," said Sister Kathleen M. Schipani, I.H.M., the department's administrator who is also the director of religious education for the Deaf Apostolate.

"Many members of the deaf apostolate were part of the Sunday Mass scene in the movie. Seeing characters in the movie attending church and opening themselves to God's Word in Scripture are themes you do not often see in Hollywood productions," Sister Schipani said. "American Sign Language, deaf performers and the religious themes make this a very unique film."

Retired Sister Barbara Bradley, S.S.J., 72, who resides at her order's motherhouse in Philadelphia's Chestnut Hill section, plays a religious sister and choir director. "It was a pleasure to work with professionals who have a keen interest in the spiritual aspect of life, suffering and redemption," she said. "I enjoyed the interaction with persons who have that kind of spin on life."

Also appearing in the film is Denise Logan, an interpreter and coordinator of religious education in the Archdiocese's Deaf Apostolate who assists with deaf ministry at Our Lady of Ransom Parish.

In the film, Logan portrays the mother of twin girls and delivers a line in American Sign Language. "It was an amazing experience," she said of not only being in a movie, but being part of a bilingual movie set. Logan was awestruck by the cast of deaf and hearing actors and actresses who were "beyond fabulous in their craft."

Logan graduated from St. Matthew School in Philadelphia in 1969 and from St. Hubert Catholic High School for Girls in Philadelphia in 1973.

The film bridges two cultures — those of the deaf community and those of the hearing community, Calamia said. "They all laugh together and they all cry together. It really shows that as humans, we have this oneness and connection with each other. That's a beautiful thing."

"Catholicism has always been part of my life," Calamia said. Making the film, she said, "was a continuation of what I grew up with."

Furthermore, the film afforded her the opportunity to "reach out to an underserved community in this country — the deaf and hard of hearing community — and embrace them."

She also enjoyed exploring a number of advocacy issues on their behalf. Helping others, "that's something my parents have taught me and I've learned through my Catholic upbringing," Calamia said.

The cast includes Anthony Natale, Sabrina Lloyd, Margot Kidder, Lupe Ontiveros, Robert Picardo, Ashlyn Sanchez, Deanne Bray, Troy Kotsur and Aimee Garcia.

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The film's original score is by Academy Award winner Joseph Renzetti.

The film is being promoted at the grassroots level. "We don't have major Hollywood distribution," Calamia said.

Although the film is not rated, Calamia said the movie is equivalent to a PG-13 rating.

Churches, Catholic colleges and high schools, Bible study groups young adult groups and American Sign Language clubs, among others, may sponsor screenings on their location as a fundraiser for their organizations, Calamia said. In addition to profits that the sponsoring organizations will receive, more than 10 percent of the film's profits will benefit the deaf and hard of hearing community in Philadelphia.

"It's a film that gives back," Calamia said.

For more information, visit the web site [www.universalsignsmovie.com](http://www.universalsignsmovie.com) or call (267) 880-1922.

CS&T Staff Writer *Christie L. Chicoine* may be reached at (215) 587-2468 or [cchicoine@adphila.org](mailto:cchicoine@adphila.org).

### Film premieres in Glenside

The premiere of "Universal Signs" is Saturday, May 30, at the Keswick Theatre in Glenside. The matinee begins at 1 p.m. — doors open at noon. The evening screening is at 7 — doors open at 6 p.m. The Keswick Theatre is located at 291 N. Keswick Ave., Glenside, PA 19038. Audience members will have the opportunity to meet and greet a number of the film's cast and crew. To order tickets, visit [www.universalsignsmovie.com](http://www.universalsignsmovie.com) or call (267) 880-1922. Tickets will also be sold at the door.

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