

● **BREAKING**

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CORONAVIRUS CASES, 61 DEATHS**

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DOC TALK

A justice speaks; justice is elusive; justice is sought

By **Peter Keough** Globe correspondent, Updated February 18, 2021, 1:45 p.m.



Ruth Bader Ginsburg, as seen in "Ruth: Justice Ginsburg in Her Own Words." HANDOUT

One of the unexpected revelations in Freida Lee Mock's "**Ruth: Justice Ginsburg in Her Own Words**" (2019) is that the late, idolized US Supreme Court justice, who died in September at 87, owed her writing skills to her European literature professor at Cornell University, the novelist Vladimir Nabokov. That distinguished tutelage helped make her, according to one of her former aides, the Tiger Woods of writing briefs.

Mock compiles archival interviews and public utterances by Ruth Bader Ginsburg as well

as interviews with former aides, associates, and others. These tidbits personalize Ginsburg's now-familiar trajectory from star law school graduate spurned by employers, to ace ACLU lawyer who prevailed in several gender discrimination cases brought before the Supreme Court, to D.C. Circuit judge, to associate Supreme Court justice in 1993 — only the second woman and the first Jewish woman to attain that position.

Highlights include interviews with two women whose lives were transformed by Ginsburg's court victories and Ginsburg's chats with grade-schoolers, especially young girls. She tells them of her struggles finding a job despite graduating from Columbia Law School tied for first in her class. "I had three strikes against me," she says. "I was Jewish, a woman, and a mother of a 4-year-old."

Also notable is Ginsburg's odd-couple friendship with the late Justice Antonin Scalia. They held antithetical legal philosophies — Scalia was a conservative originalist who adhered to a literal interpretation of the Constitution while the liberal Ginsburg believed that the Constitution was flexible enough to reflect the times. But their good humor, ability to argue ideas, and mutual love of opera proved lasting bonds. "What's not to like?" says Scalia in an interview. "Except for her views of the law of course." The film testifies not just to Ginsburg's greatness but to a time when good fellowship and a common will to do good could prevail over differences in ideology.

"Ruth: Justice Ginsburg in Her Own Words" can be streamed at the Coolidge Corner Theater's Virtual Screening Room and on TVOD beginning March 9. Go to [coolidge.org/films/ruth-justice-ginsburg-her-own-words](https://www.coolidge.org/films/ruth-justice-ginsburg-her-own-words).



Emmanuel Sanford-Durant and his mother, Cheryl Sanford. SANFORD FAMILY

Home movie

Some 20 years ago filmmaker Davy Rothbart joined Emmanuel Sanford-Durant, then 9, and his older brother, Smurf, then 15, in a pickup basketball game in Southeast Washington, D.C. Intrigued by the two, Rothbart began filming their lives, then handed over a camera to them and their family so they could film themselves.

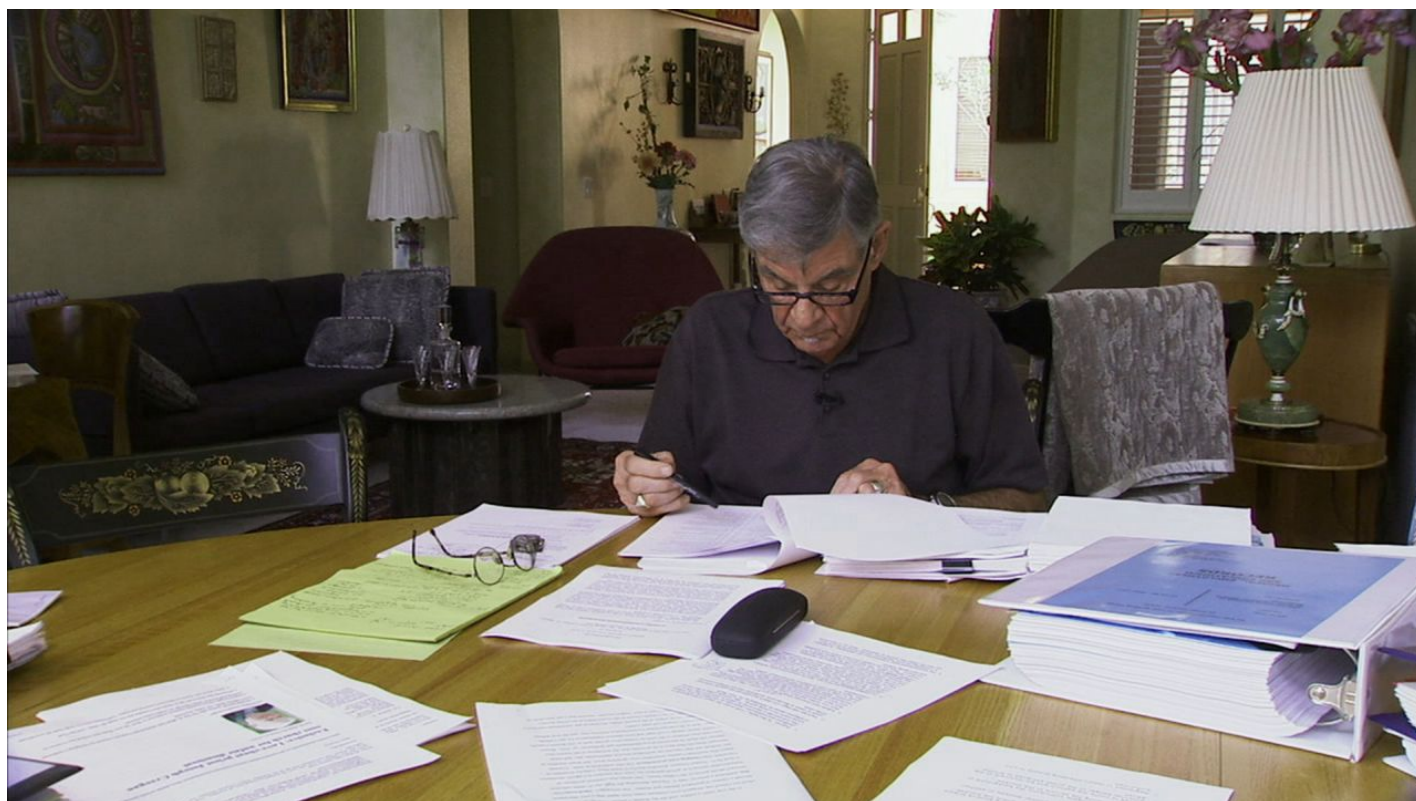
Over a thousand hours of footage was shot, which Rothbart has cut down to 90 minutes for the absorbing, dramatic, and intimately observational **“17 Blocks”** (2019). It’s a documentary unfolding with the unexpected twists and turns, tragedies, and triumphs that only real life can, and it presents a microcosm of the history of racial strife and injustice that occurred over those two decades.

It begins near the end of the story as Cheryl, Emmanuel and Smurf’s mother, visits the family’s old home, 17 blocks from the White House. It’s been gentrified, and the white man who owns it is welcoming and sympathetic as Cheryl explores the rehabbed house. Tearfully reflecting on the years of loss and regrets, she laments, “My actions caused a chain reaction.”

Indeed, her battle with addiction put the two brothers and their sister in a rough place at the start of their lives. Emmanuel, the more resilient, optimistic, and motivated of the two brothers, aspired to be a firefighter and made strides to become one. Smurf, however, was drawn to the gangster life of dealing and doing drugs (a scene of him beating up a youth who owes him money is startling). Their lives don’t turn out as expected, and though Cheryl takes responsibility, the film shows how misfortune is as much the result of generations of repeated family trauma and oppression as it is due to personal responsibility.

Like Garrett Bradley’s “Time”(shortlisted for a 2020 best documentary Oscar), Leslye Davis and Catrin Einhorn’s “Father Soldier Son” (2020), and Jonathan Olshefski’s “Quest” (2017), “17 Blocks” takes the long view, following families for years and showing how they endure hardship and survive, and sometimes prevail. It is an intimate epic, a generational saga that reflects the whims and injustices of a system in need of change.

“17 Blocks” can be streamed at virtual cinemas nationwide beginning Feb. 19. Go to watch.eventive.org/17blocks.



Richard Sipe in "Sipe: Sex, Lies and the Priesthood." HANDOUT

True confessions

You might not remember the moment, but the title subject of Joe Cultrera's "**Sipe: Sex, Lies, and the Priesthood**" is depicted, vocally that is, by Richard Jenkins in a brief scene in the Oscar-winning "Spotlight" (2015). "Guys, I've got Sipe!" exclaims a member of the Boston Globe Spotlight team in the film. On speakerphone Richard Sipe reveals the extent of sexual activity within the priesthood, the Catholic Church's knowledge of it, and its coverup.

It was a reality that Sipe, a former Benedictine monk, priest, and psychotherapist, had been studying for decades. While serving the Church as a therapist, he treated some 6,000 members of the clergy and found that the rule of celibacy had led priests into secret sexual behavior, often with minors vulnerable to their authority. His warnings to the hierarchy were ignored, and he was ostracized. He left the priesthood and authored

several books on the subject, becoming an expert witness for the prosecution in hundreds of clergy abuse cases.

Cultrera interviews Sipe at length in the film. As a boy, he was enraptured by the church and priesthood. But the pomp and glory that beguiled him as a youth proved to be a mask covering corruption. Courageously and with good humor Sipe continues to pursue his investigations, which he hopes will help restore decency and integrity to the institution he still loves.

“Sipe: Sex, Lies, and the Priesthood” can be streamed live as part of Salem Film Fest’s winter screening series on Feb. 20 at 7 p.m. The screening will be followed by a panel discussion that includes Richard Sipe’s wife, the psychiatrist Marianne Benkert Sipe; abuse survivor and activist Phil Saviano; Robert Orsi, the Grace Craddock Nagle Chair of Catholic Studies at Northwestern University; and Kara French, associate professor of history at Salisbury University. Go to salemfilmfest.com. The film can then be seen on VOD until March 4.

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