

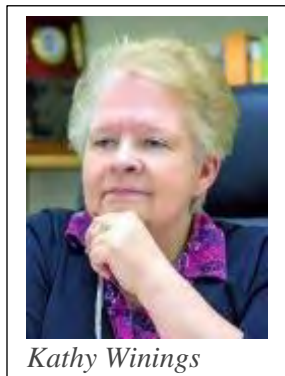
Extraordinary Contributions by Ordinary People: 'Cabrini' and 'One Life'

Kathy Winings
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A movie still from "Cabrini" (courtesy Angel Studios)

Movies were created to tell stories. These stories might be sad, funny, scary, or thought-provoking. Some, though, inspire and motivate us to be better human beings.



Kathy Winings

Two such inspiring films are powerful true stories that touch our souls. They are "Cabrini" and "One Life." Both tell the story of individuals who left a profound mark on history through simple acts of love that saved lives and demonstrated the best in us.

"Cabrini" tells the story of Mother Francesca Xavier Cabrini, a woman who felt called to address the poverty and social inequities faced by millions of people around the world, beginning initially with the immigrant population in New York City at the end of the 19th century.

"One Life" presents the story of Sir Nicholas Winton and his dramatic efforts to rescue 669 Jewish Czech children in Prague just before the start of World War II and Hitler's invasion of that country.

Mother Francesca Cabrini (Cristiana Dell'Anna), the founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (canonized by the Catholic Church as the first naturalized U.S. citizen-saint in 1946), was a diminutive Italian woman who was told she would not live much past age 30 due to "weak lungs." She felt called to do missionary work in China and began petitioning the curia for permission to do so. After petitioning the Vatican for permission to do so and being told "no" repeatedly, she is finally called to Rome where she pushes for an audience with Pope Leo XIII (Giancarlo Giannini).

When he also initially denies her request, she challenges his decision until he relents. But instead of going to China, he asks her to go to New York City to address the urgent needs of the thousands of poor Italian immigrants. She is further given permission to utilize local church property in Five Points, the large neighborhood in Lower Manhattan that was home to the immigrant populations.

Cabrini and the sisters from her order leave for New York with almost no money but with the determination and courage to serve the needs of the poor. Between the dangerous nature of the area and unresponsive New York Archbishop Michael Corrigan (David Morse), the women are told to return to Italy, which they refuse to do. They are resolved to serve the community - regardless of the conditions - and waste no time in cleaning and preparing the first of many orphanages Cabrini would establish over time.

In meeting with Archbishop Corrigan, she must stand firm yet be respectful to the prelate. He permits Cabrini to stay and set up her programs, but emphasizes she cannot draw attention to her work and is not to raise funds or draw public attention in general to her projects. A resourceful woman, Mother Cabrini and the sisters are soon busy organizing programs and promoting their activities, drawing the attention and support of immigrants and funders alike by word of mouth as well as through stories in local newspapers, including one from a *New York Times* editor who becomes an advocate of her work.

The newspaper articles call attention to Cabrini's amazing work, which results in donations pouring in, allowing for more programs but also attracting more attention - both negative and positive. The anti-Italian and anti-immigrant sentiment gets louder with two important consequences. First, Cabrini begins to expand her efforts to address the overwhelming needs of the orphans and poor. Second, the New York City political machine begins a quiet war against Mother Cabrini's work. The Archbishop finds himself caught in the middle - wanting to support Cabrini's work yet afraid it will upset the delicate balance in relationship between the Church and the political leadership of New York.

An important development is the donation of an estate in Ulster County in upstate New York to the Archdiocese, which the Archbishop offers to Cabrini as a base for their hospital and orphanage. The sisters undertake the arduous tasks of restoring the building and digging wells to bring water to the building. A fundraiser for Cabrini's work draws the negative attention of the political machine in New York resulting in Cabrini's arrest. This gives Corrigan reason to send her back to Italy. Not to be deterred, Cabrini strengthens the support of the Pope who subsequently writes a letter for Cabrini to demonstrate his support for her work that she can take back to her naysayers.

On her return to New York, Cabrini begins to turn a building into the first hospital within the Mother Cabrini network. The film highlights the efforts by the political leadership and, to an extent the local Catholic leadership, to try to stop or limit Cabrini's powerful work. Through it all, what remains is Cabrini's faithful and prayerful life - even in the midst of illness and the possibility of a short life hanging over her head. Cabrini would go on to expand her network of hospitals, orphanages and care around the world.



The official trailer for "Cabrini" (courtesy Angel Studios).

The second film, "One Life," outlines the equally remarkable story of Nicholas (Nicky) Winton (Anthony Hopkins), who took responsibility for saving 669 Jewish children who had fled Germany and Austria for Czechoslovakia when Nazism began to take root. The children and their families were living in desolate conditions - on the streets, in tents and in storage sheds with little food and in fear for their lives. A young stockbroker, Winton finds himself in Prague to provide support to the British Committee on Refugees in Czechoslovakia. After walking through the streets where he is a witness to the conditions of the children, Winton is moved to ask how he can save these children from certain death. Without money or governmental connections, he is told that what he wants to do is not possible. At the very least, he needs to work with name lists and information on the children he hopes to help.

This leads him to organization after organization until he finds one willing to take a chance on him and share their valuable records on hundreds of families and children. With this information in hand, Winton enlists his mother and friends in Britain to help. He needs three things: money to transport the children to Britain, UK visas, and English families willing to take the children in until it is safe for them to return to

their families in Czechoslovakia. He needs to accomplish all of this under a ticking clock, unsure if or when the border will close because of growing threats of war.

The film switches back and forth between the present day and Winton's reflection on his time in Prague, triggered by his nostalgic review of the scrapbook he had saved that documented every child rescued. However, what haunts Winton the most is the memory of the last trainload of over a 100 children who never made it out of Prague because of Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia. Believing his scrapbook should be placed in a library or museum, he shares it with people who he believes could do something constructive with it.

Eventually he receives a phone call inviting him to be interviewed on a popular British television program, "That's Life." Unknown to Winton, when he appears on the show, one of the first children he had rescued, now an adult, is sitting next to him. When the episode draws tremendous attention, a second show is organized and this time the full audience is composed of those whom he had rescued.



The official trailer for "One Life" (courtesy Warner Brothers).

Both films present the remarkable actions of two individuals who could surround themselves with a team of individuals drawn by the heart and spirit of love and conviction they could make a profound difference in the lives of those they sought to serve. The powerful results of both Mother Cabrini and Sir Nicholas Winton were more than one lone person could accomplish. They would be the first to testify that the reason so many people were helped is because of the commitment of the team around them.

But, as the films point out, it wasn't just about the sisters around Mother Cabrini or the support team around Winton. It was also about the trust which the children and the immigrants had for Cabrini and Winton. Through my work in leading an international sustainable development and disaster mitigation organization, IRFF, I have found that gaining the trust of those whom we are supporting is vital. The immigrant population Cabrini addressed lived on the streets, in the sewers and in the darkest corners of large urban communities. They could not afford to trust just anyone due to the criminal element and those seeking to control or harm them.

Trust in Winton and his team was especially critical for the Czech children and their parents. These were young children ranging in age from toddlers to adolescents with all of them traveling from Czechoslovakia to Great Britain for the first time with only one or two chaperons, and then placed with complete strangers, not knowing if they would ever see their parents again.

Both films also present a bird's-eye view of the challenges faced by both Cabrini and Winton. Naturally, the primary challenge that was well presented in the films was financial. Humanitarian and development work are an expensive endeavor, as I know only too well as the leader of IRFF. One is always raising funds to keep up with the growing numbers and needs of the people seeking assistance. Finances are needed for each step of the journey to safety. In both cases, Cabrini and Winton were direct and did not hesitate to convey the financial obstacles to potential donors. They were also passionate about their work.

The third major challenge was that of dealing with those who stood in the way of Cabrini and Winton moving their projects forward.

Cabrini, as a woman in a very male-dominated society, was challenged on multiple fronts but most

particularly from the leadership of the Catholic Church - both in Italy as well as in New York. The second major form of resistance came from the political leadership in New York City. Yet, the film points out powerfully how Cabrini faced these obstacles unapologetically but with a quiet resolve and respect. In it all, she does not forget who she is - a faith-filled woman committed to serving those in need.

Winton, on the other hand, was a man, which should have made things easier, but his challenges were based on his young age and relative naivety. Again, Winton's sheer determination and deep conviction were key to his success. At the same time, he had a powerful advocate in his mother, who was able to compensate for his relative youth.

In my work with IRFF, I was able to network with the Mother Cabrini House in New York City. This experience gave me a small glimpse of her contributions. It was this previous experience that led me to see the movie. However, the movie presents Cabrini's depth of love for God, confidence that even a small group of faithful individuals can do great things and the will to make a difference regardless the odds. As a bonus, while the credits scrolled, famed tenor Andrea Bocelli and his daughter, Virginia, perform an original song, "Dare to Be." It was the perfect ending for this inspiring film; a song which may well win the 2025 Oscar for Best Original Song.

The bonus in this experience was being introduced to an individual who made such a difference in our world but in a very different kind of project. We hear of many stories of men and women who help rescue people from truly horrendous circumstances. Most stories offer a glimpse into the rescue of an individual or small group of people here and there. The sheer number of children Sir Nicholas Winton was able to rescue from certain death, though, highlights the power of love and conviction.

Though I walked into the theater uncertain about what I would gain, I left "One Life" in awe of the lasting contributions made not just by Winton but, even greater, through the lives of the 669 children who survived one of history's darkest events and went on to make their own contributions to the world. As I commented to a theater staff person on leaving, "You should warn us that this is a five hanky movie."♦

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"Cabrini" (rated PG-13): Running time: 142 minutes. Directed by: Alejandro Monteverde; written by: Rod Barr and Alejandro Monteverde. Main cast: Cristiana Dell'Anna, Romana Maggiora Vergano, David Morse, Giancarlo Giannini, Patch Darragh, and John Lithgow. See IMDb for full details. Currently only in theaters, but the first 19 minutes can be watched on YouTube.

"One Life" (rated PG): Running time 110 minutes. Directed by: James Hawes; written by: Lucinda Coxon, Nick Drake, and Barbara Winton. Main cast: Anthony Hopkins, Lena Olin, Johnny Flynn, Helena Bonham Carter, and Tim Steed. See IMDb for full details. In theaters and available to rent or buy on major streaming platforms.