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**SISTERS: PORTRAIT OF A BENEDICTINE COMMUNITY  
AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT A COMMUNITY OF NUNS  
FACING CHANGING TIMES**

**PREMIERES ON THE PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS*,  
A FILM FESTIVAL IN YOUR LIVING ROOM,  
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20, AT 10 PM  
(Check Local Listings)**

**As the Population of Nuns Ages the Future of the Monastic Life Is Uncertain**

(San Francisco)—**SISTERS** is a fascinating inside look at a vibrant Benedictine community of women as they meet the challenges of their aging population and a changing world while staying true to the age-old principles of their order. Shot over a two-year period, this revealing documentary captures the many different faces of the sisters of St. Scholastica Monastery in Duluth, Minnesota, as they pursue a life of work, prayer and leisure in a time when their traditional way of life seems in danger of vanishing. From elderly nuns still wearing the traditional habit, to new younger inductees accustomed to the freedom of modern life, from singing the Psalms together in chapel to cheering the Minnesota Vikings on TV, the sisters face their uncertain future together with spirit, conviction and wit. **SISTERS**, directed by John Hanson (*Northern Lights*) produced by Jack Lind, Tom Livingston and Hanson will air nationally on the PBS series *Independent Lens* on Tuesday, December 20, at 10 PM (check local listings).

St. Scholastica Monastery was founded in 1892, from Benedictine roots in Eichstatt, Bavaria, and a subsequent American monastic community in St. Mary's, Pennsylvania. In 1909, the sisters established their permanent and present-day home on farmland overlooking Lake Superior on the outskirts of Duluth. As active monastics, the sisters worked primarily in education and health care, eventually building or staffing more than 50 schools, numerous hospitals, nursing homes and orphanages throughout Minnesota and six adjoining states. At its peak, the community had more than 500 members, a full complement of novices in formation and a highly rated school, the College of St. Scholastica. Today, fewer than 150 sisters remain in the community; the average age is nearly 80; few young women are entering the order; and there is increasing pressure to adapt to contemporary life. Their dwindling numbers are reflective of those across America. In 1965, there were close to 180,000 sisters; by 2004, that number had declining to 70,000.



In the film, a wide cross-section of sisters open up to the camera, telling about their chosen lives while at work, prayer and leisure—the three aspects of monastic life as prescribed by St. Benedict in the sixth century. Opening with a funeral for a community elder, **SISTERS** goes inside the convent and follows its daily life of communal prayer and ritual, music rehearsals, teaching, tending to the sick, gardening, dining and socializing together. As one sister says, “We are a microcosm of the world. We are just like any other group of people—some days we get along better than others.” These often surprising images of monastic life break the traditional stereotype of nuns and reveal the sisters as complex and diverse human beings.

Throughout the film, the sisters talk candidly about their hopes and concerns, the future of the monastery, and their commitment to a Benedictine way of life. Older sisters complain they can’t do as much as they used to—their bodies won’t bend, their fingers won’t grasp anymore—then they laugh, and joke about “the golden years.” Young novices are rare these days—many new sisters come to the monastery in middle age, after marriage, children and career, drawn by the monastic ideal as well as the Benedictine commitment to service and social justice. One new sister admits that it isn’t always easy: “Some days I want a pet, I want a beer—there are days like that.” As another sister says, “After you get through the rough times of thinking that life is greener on the other side of the fence, as you age, you realize it really isn’t. Life is life wherever you go, and it’s a tradeoff. You trade one set of freedoms for another. That’s all—one set of happinesses for another.”

The film also follows several sisters as they work in ministries outside the convent. One elderly sister volunteers at a hospice within a Duluth hospital originally founded by the monastery. Another group serves meals to the homeless at Union Gospel Mission, an expression of the Benedictine commitment to serve the poor. At the McCabe Renewal Center, three sisters staff a counseling and healing center open to anyone seeking spiritual renewal. One of the sisters there, an ex-nurse, has become a masseuse. She and her colleagues at the Renewal Center also incorporate a feminine God in their daily prayers. They know their lifestyle at the Renewal Center bothers some of the older, more traditional sisters up on the hill, but as one of them says with a smile, “They don’t bother us—they’re probably praying for us.”

Warm, surprising and moving, **SISTERS** is a look at an often-misunderstood world and portrays the sisters of St. Scholastica Monastery in all their complexity and humanity. The **SISTERS** interactive companion website ([www.pbs.org/independentlens/sisters](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/sisters)) features detailed information on the film, including an interview with the filmmakers and links and resources pertaining to the film’s subject matter. The site also features a Talkback section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film, and more.



## CREDITS

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS



<b>Director</b>	John Hanson
<b>Producers</b>	Jack Lind Tom Livingston John Hanson
<b>Cameraman/Editor</b>	Jack Lind
<b>Music Composer</b>	Bruce Bowers

**John Hanson** is a veteran independent producer, director and writer of motion pictures, television programs and documentaries. He has directed the feature films *Northern Lights*, *Wildrose* and *Shimmer* and produced the public television specials *Talking Pictures*, winner of a regional Emmy Award, and *A Sense of Place*. In addition to **SISTERS**, his documentaries include *Western Coal*, *Prairie Fire*, *Rebel Earth*, *Survivor*, *Troubled Waters* and *Edge of a New Era*. He has received many awards, including the prestigious Camera d'Or Award at the Cannes International Film Festival, the Neil Simon Award for Best Screenplay in a Television Drama Series and the Grand Prize at Figueria Da Foz International Film Festival. His productions have been selected for screening at many international film festivals, including Sundance, Venice, Toronto, Berlin, London, Chicago, and New York.

*Wildrose* was selected for the respected *New Films/New Directors* series at MOMA, and *Northern Lights* and *Shimmer* were both broadcast nationally on the PBS series *American Playhouse*. Hanson currently has several documentaries in development, including *Return of the Last Picture Show*, about the revival of small-town movie theaters in the Great Plains, and a dramatic feature, *Nameless*, set in the North Dakota Badlands. With **SISTERS** producer Tom Livingston, he is also developing *American Roads*, a 13-part series for PBS on the nation's scenic byways.

**Jack Lind** is producer, cameraman and editor for Pro Video Productions, Inc., a full-service, for-profit video production company located in Duluth, Minnesota. Since 1982, Lind's skills have been vital components in Pro Video's national reputation for consistent quality and excellence in commercial and documentary productions. Lind's artistic eye and dedication to photography, filmmaking and video production have earned his work scores of Addys, four Telly statuettes, and a New York Film and Television Silver Award. Included in Lind's award-winning work are the following productions: *Start-Up*, a documentary on the successful building of an environment-friendly paper mill on the shores of Lake Superior; *The Best*, a series of docudrama messages for a nationally acclaimed rehabilitation center; and **SISTERS**.

**Tom Livingston** is the field producer and location director for Pro Video Productions, Inc., a full-service, for-profit video production company located in Duluth, Minnesota. Livingston, a lifelong resident of Duluth, has developed film and video projects for national health, transportation, environment and education concerns. Livingston has functioned as producer/director for several wilderness education projects for the state of Minnesota, many community development projects for regional and national nonprofit organizations, and numerous programs for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Federal Aviation Administration. Significant recognized works from Livingston's production résumé include *Start-Up*, *The Best*, **SISTERS** and *Edge of a New Era*, an FAA-sponsored documentary on the modernization of the national airspace system.

## ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

## ABOUT ITVS

## ABOUT PBS

The images found in this release and more are available to the press as high resolution downloadable photos with captions and credits at [www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos/](http://www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos/)



A film festival in your living room, *Independent Lens*, is an Emmy Award-winning weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 PM on PBS. Hosted by Edie Falco, the acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement and unflinching visions of independent producers, which has prompted *Television Week* to call it "Entertaining as hell and better than any other documentary series around."

Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion websites and community engagement campaigns. Further information about the series is available at [www.pbs.org/independentlens](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens). *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the Emmy Award-winning weekly series *Independent Lens* on Tuesday nights at 10 PM on PBS. ITVS is a miracle of public policy created by media activists, citizens and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting [itvs.org](http://itvs.org). ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

PBS, headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, is a private, nonprofit media enterprise owned and operated by the nation's 349 public television stations. Serving nearly 90 million people each week, PBS enriches the lives of all Americans through quality programs and education services on non-commercial television, the Internet and other media. More information about PBS is available at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org), the leading dot-org Web site on the Internet.

### PAGE 1:

**Left:** Sr. Janelle Cahoon in the cloister walk at the St. Scholastica Monastery.

Photo: Mary Farrel / ITVS

**Center:** Sisters Freida and Benet work in the garden on the grounds of the St. Scholastica Monastery.

Photo: Sr. Mary Farrell / ITVS

**Right:** Sr Lois Eckes on the grounds of the McCabe Renewal Center.

Photo: Sr. Pamela Kern / ITVS

### PAGE 2:

**Left:** Sr. Mary Susan entertains at a Monastery picnic.

Photo: S. Mary Farrell / ITVS

**Center:** Benedictine Sisters team at a cancer "Walk For Life".

Photo: Sr. Mary Farrell / ITVS

**Right:** Filmmakers of *SISTERS: Portrait of a Benedictine Community* (l to r) Jack Lind (Producer), Tom Livingston (Producer) and John Hanson (Producer / Director)

Photo: John Skaria / ITVS



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