

■ Nazis' Jewish 'Counterfeiters' / D2

■ 'Stunning' world premiere / D6

■ TV listings / D9

■ Movie listings / D10

■ Tuning In / D8

Show



■ Marvin unites Belgium, Dixie / D5

FRIDAY, MARCH 21, 2008

The Washington Times

SECTION D

Lady Bird's flowering

Work blooms
in District,
across U.S.
and in movie



"A Life: The Story of Lady Bird Johnson" follows the former first lady's life and contributions to the nation.

Every spring, District-based film producer Grace Guggenheim sees the golden rows of daffodils that brighten the capital city's public spaces and does more than simply admire their beauty. She admires the woman who made beautification a local and national priority: the late Lady Bird Johnson.

Ms. Guggenheim learned about the former first lady's many contributions to our country's environmental health and visual landscape (including the capital beautification project responsible for so many of this city's sun-colored blooms) while producing a film in the early 1990s with her father, acclaimed documentarian Charles Guggenheim. That work, "A Life: The Story of Lady Bird Johnson," was created in honor of Mrs. Johnson's 80th birthday and shown at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in 1992.

Since its initial screening, Ms. Guggenheim has given the film a second life through a VHS and DVD release and film-festival screenings. It has received special attention from the city's Environmental Film Festival, which has included the documentary in its roster several times over its 16-year history and is doing so again this year.

"A Life: The Story of Lady Bird Johnson" takes a rather direct route, following its subject from birth in rural Texas to the White House, then back to the Lone Star State. In the process, it illuminates the influence Mrs. Johnson had on her husband during his presidency (1963-1969) and discusses many of her pet projects — including cleaning up the nation's highways, expanding the national parks system and founding the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas.

The film integrates then-new interviews with its subject along with archival footage, photographs and commentary. Combined, these elements form a finished product that enables Mrs. Johnson's charms, eloquence, vision and strength of conviction to shine through.

"You can really feel her passion and get a strong sense of what she believed in," Ms. Guggenheim says. "She really draws us in by her charismatic way of talking."

The filmmaker notes that Mrs. Johnson's story certainly fits into environmentalist dialogue, pointing out that the former first lady "was really a pioneer of the environmental movement."

"Also," Ms. Guggenheim says, "I think she's an amazing role model for young women. . . . She lived in such a traditional time, and yet, she took on opportunity and made it happen."

Ms. Guggenheim (who is the sister of Davis Guggenheim, director of the Oscar-winning "An Inconvenient Truth") has devoted much of her career to preserving history and making sure the legacies of people such as her father and Mrs. Johnson aren't forgotten.

"We are kind of at a crisis in this country because we are historically ignorant, so that's why I get really gritty about it," the filmmaker says.

It's not an easy job, she adds, but it's an important one — and one she has come to love.

"A Life: The Story of Lady Bird Johnson" screens for free tonight at 7 at the National Portrait Gallery. It will be preceded by an introduction by Sid Hart, a senior historian at the gallery, and followed by a discussion with Ms. Guggenheim and Bess Abell, Mrs. Johnson's social secretary from 1963 to 1969. For details, call 202/342-2564 or visit www.dcenvironmentalfilmfest.org.

**Beyond
Hollywood**
Jenny
Mayo