

Oklahoma senator joins in panel discussion about his faith-themed movie 'Heaven's Rain'

Former state Sen. Brooks Douglass recently joined in an Oklahoma City University panel discussion about the legal and moral issues raised in his fact-based movie 'Heaven's Rain'.

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The feature film "Heaven's Rain" is more than a true and compelling story of a family shattered by a horrific crime.

The movie, co-written and produced by former state Sen. Brooks Douglass, strikes at the core of issues of morality and justice.

So said members of a panel that gathered to discuss the film at a recent screening of the faith-themed movie at Oklahoma City University.

Douglass, an OCU alumnus, joined with attorney Mike Turpen and the Rev. Robin Meyers, OCU professor of rhetoric and senior pastor of Mayflower Congregational Church (United Church of Christ), for a panel discussion about the moral and legal issues brought to the forefront by the film. Judge Arlene Johnson, of the Oklahoma Criminal Court of Appeals, served as moderator.

The screening and discussion event was co-sponsored by the OCU

Student Government Association, Student Bar Association, OCU Filmmakers Guild and Center for Interpersonal Studies Through Film and Literature.

The movie, filmed in Oklahoma and Brazil, depicts the October 1979 night that two men shot to death Douglass' parents, the Rev. Richard and Marilyn Douglass, at their rural home near Kingfisher. Brooks Douglass, then 16, and his sister, Leslie, 12, survived also being shot. Brooks and Leslie went on to testify at the murder trials of the two men, Glen Burton Ake and Steven Hatch, who were charged with their parents' deaths. Ake and Hatch were convicted of the murders and sentenced to death. Hatch was executed in August 1996, but Ake, the triggerman, got a new trial and was given life sentences.

About 300 people attended the screening and panel discussion Feb. 13 at OCU's Meinders School of Business.

Johnson said some members of the audience probably remembered when the Douglass murders occurred. She said the tragedy likely struck many people not only because it was a horrific crime and they felt sympathy for the young Douglasses but because they felt that if

such a crime could happen to the Douglass family, it could happen to them.

Brooks Douglass, Turpen and Meyers talked about the legal ramifications of the murders. Turpen, who was Oklahoma's attorney general at the time, argued the state's case against Ake and Hatch on appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Turpen said the Supreme Court ruled that the state of Oklahoma should have provided triggerman Ake with a psychiatrist to help him establish an insanity defense.

Johnson said it was important to note that Douglass created victims' rights legislation. Turpen said, most notably, the state created a victim compensation fund, at no cost to taxpayers, which helps victims monetarily. He said about \$50 million has been distributed from the fund thus far, as he noted that nothing like this was in place to help Brooks Douglass and his sister after their parents' murders.

The panel also addressed the spiritual and moral issues in the film.

Meyers thanked Douglas s for making the movie and then asked the former senator if he felt Hatch's execution balanced the scales of justice in his mind.

Douglass said Hatch's execution is simply treated as fact in the film. He said people grow up being taught that the police are going to protect them and that if something happens to them, the courts will do something about it. Then, at least in some people's lives, including his own, "there comes a moment where our confidence is shattered," by circumstances.

"I do believe in accountability," he said to complete his answer to Meyers' question.

Turpen said he saw in the movie that Brooks Douglass went to a face-to-face meeting with Ake to "effectuate his own justice," with the latter man serving life sentences for the crime, although he pulled the trigger killing Richard and Marilyn Douglass.

"He went there to kill the man," Turpen said.

Johnson said she thought that Brooks Douglass arrived at an in-person encounter with Ake at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, depicted in the movie, with the idea to do whatever it took for justice.

Douglass said he did not realize how much anger he had built up inside of him until he began writing the script for, "Heaven's Rain.

"It was a secret that I kept even from myself," he said.

He said he did not know what was going to happen when he met with his parents' murderer. His decision to forgive Ake came, he said, as "the hand of God."

Douglass said one of the guiding principals of the movie was to truthfully portray the anger he felt and the other troubles that had cropped up in life in the aftermath of the tragedy. He said the themes of forgiveness and civility are something he hopes people take away from the film.

"I think we need that in our world," Douglass said.

"The story is bigger than me."

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