

Film shows local rabbi helping people reclaim Judaism

By Rick Hellman

Editor

There are no happy endings in director Gabriela Bohm's new documentary film, "The Longing," which portrays the efforts of some South Americans to reclaim their Jewish heritage and that of Kansas City's Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn to help them do so.

But Bohm believes the film has a lot to say about what makes a person Jewish, which makes it perfect for inclusion in the ninth annual Kansas City Jewish Film Festival. "The Longing: The Forgotten Jews of South America" shows at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 22, at the Rio Theatre. She and Rabbi Cukierkorn will talk after the showing.

"In my opinion, it is a film that raises questions about what it is to be a Jew; what are the boundaries to convert back to Judaism; what is the Latin Jewish experience," Bohm said in an interview this week. "Most people in North America are unaware that there are Jews in Latin America. So there is educa-



A beit din Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn (center) convened in Ecuador is a highlight of 'The Longing.'

tional value to two things — to learn about the Inquisition in South America as well as the conversion process. This film shows the conversion process that has not really been seen in documentary form."

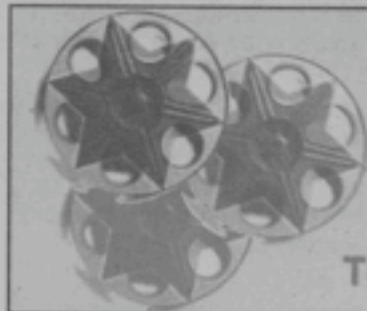


Prospective convert Borys Valverde.

The Spanish Inquisition forced thousands of Jews to officially convert to Catholicism in the 15th and 16th centuries, and yet many retained their Jewish practices in secret. Many of these so-called conversos, or crypto-Jews, came to the New World, where some of their descendants today seek to reclaim their long suppressed, even forgotten, Jewish heritage. Some of them wish to convert, or, as Bohm puts it, revert to Judaism officially.

And yet these people find little sympathy or help among the born Jews in South America. That's why, with the advent of the Internet, many of them have turned to Rabbi Cukierkorn, a native of Brazil who now leads KC's New Reform Temple. He has written a Spanish-language guidebook for the curious, and he has helped dozens of individuals prepare for and

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