

'The Divide' studies the passionate defense of innocence



"The Divide" stars Marin Ireland as Christine Rosa, a conflicted law-student intern with a Philadelphia innocence project.

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For Christine Rosa, the heroine of the new cable crime drama *The Divide*, justice - true Justice, with a capital J - has very little to do with the deaf, dumb, blind machinery called the justice system.

Premiering Wednesday on WE TV with a two-hour movie, *The Divide* is about the fictional Innocence Initiative, a Philadelphia organization, led by crusading lawyer Clark Rylance (Paul Schneider), committed to overturning wrongful murder convictions.

Their story - and the tragic stories of the convicts they serve - is told through the eyes of Christine, a law student who is one of the interns at the Initiative.

"She's a good lawyer, but a terrible student," said Marin Ireland, who stars as Christine. "But she's really passionate and defiant: When she's working on behalf of a person she believes is innocent, she's relentless."

The pilot follows the death-row case of two white men convicted a dozen years earlier of murdering an African American family. The case received national attention and helped the prosecutor, Adam Page (Damon Gupton), win the Philadelphia district attorney's office.

Page, one of Rylance's best friends in law school, is horrified when his friend's organization takes up the case for review. Their friendship makes the conflict all the more powerful, said actor and producer Tony Goldwyn (*Scandal*), who cocreated *The Divide* with *The Fisher King* screenwriter Richard LaGravenese.

"Our show is about the question of 'What divide would you cross within yourself to achieve what you believe is justice?' " said LaGravenese.

For one thing, he said, suspicion is cast on Page's handling of the case. He "believes himself to be a morally powerful man," said Goldwyn, "and he ends up getting into treacherous waters."

But the real divide is the one that drives its lead character, Christine, who will do virtually anything to prove that the Initiative's clients are innocent.

"She appears to be doing the right thing," Goldwyn said, "but we will find her doing things that are objectively immoral."

Ireland said Christine's dedication to her clients is almost pathological.

"Heck, given the choice, I think she'd break the guy out with guns," she said.

Christine has a conflicted relationship with the law, Ireland said. She grew up believing the cops, attorneys, and judges who serve the justice system were the enemy: After all, they arrested, tried, and convicted her father of murder when she was still a child.

Convinced her dad was innocent, Christine is deeply suspicious of the entire system her law school is preparing her to join. It's an almost untenable situation.

"She doesn't believe that the law works," Ireland said. "Yet it's the only system that exists, and so she is trying to find her way through it."

Goldwyn and LaGravenese said they based the show's Innocence Initiative on New York's famous Innocence Project, founded in 1992 by Barry Scheck.

Series creators also consulted with the staff of the **Pennsylvania Innocence Project**, based at Temple University. It's one of more than 60 such organizations across the country modeled on Scheck's groundbreaking group.

All are beset by more requests for help than they could handle in a lifetime, said **Pennsylvania Innocence Project legal director Marissa Bluestine**.

"There's a line in the pilot where [Christine] says, 'It's harder to get into Harvard than to get the Initiative to take a convict's case,'" Bluestine said. "That's true."

Founded in 2009, the Philadelphia project, which has a staff of four and about 30 full-time interns, has received requests from 4,000 inmates. "We have about 200 cases entering the review process, 130 currently under review, and 19 that we are currently litigating," said Bluestine, 47, an alumna of Temple Law School.

The work requires immense patience from lawyer and inmate alike. Each case, Bluestine said, can take up to a dozen years to complete.

Crystle Craig, an intern under Bluestine, said she can understand the kind of anguish that tears at Christine. The workload alone can be intimidating, she said, but there also is an emotional toll: "It can break your heart."

Worse, Craig said, she believes she's always working uphill. "When I tell people about my job, they won't even see it as a possibility that these people might be innocent," said Craig, who this fall will enter her third year at Dickinson School of Law in Carlisle. "I'll hear people say, 'These convicts already had a chance, they were tried and convicted. And the system works for everyone.' "