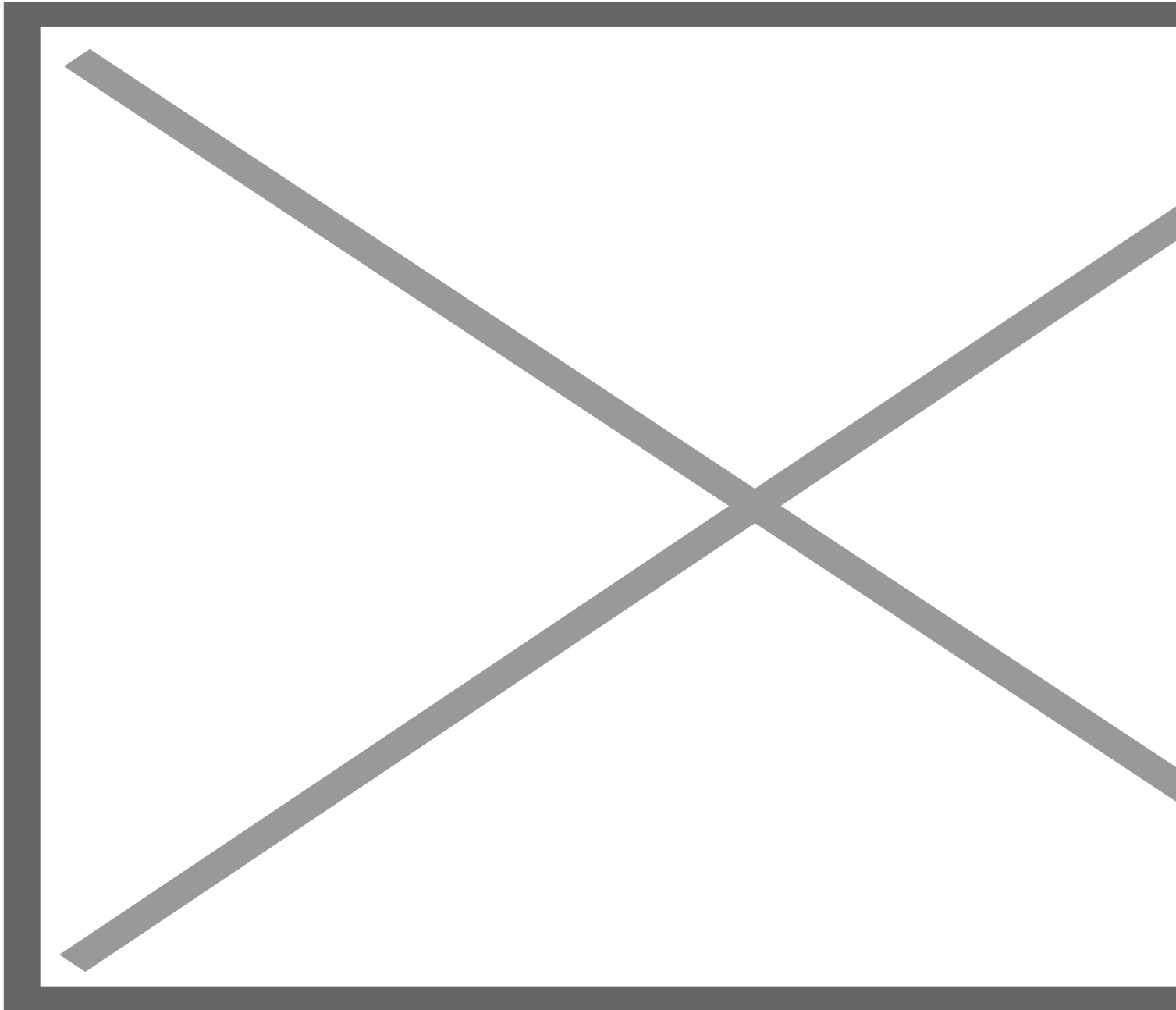


Documentary tells story of Washington National Cathedral's West Rose window

by [Shireen Korkzan](#)

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The West Rose abstract stained-glass window at Washington National Cathedral in Washington, DC. (Photo: Global Visions & Associates, Inc.)

A [documentary](#) on the Washington National Cathedral's West Rose stained-glass window tells the story of the window's creation and how it made the neo-Gothic building a space that embraces both tradition and modernity.

Filming the hour-long documentary, *The Creation Rose*, was a professional and personal project for Peter Swanson, whose father was an Episcopal priest and whose mother worked at Washington National Cathedral. One of his summer jobs in high school was serving as a mail carrier for the cathedral in the early 1970s.

“I just love sitting at the cathedral and just looking at the West Rose’s sparkle. Its light changes so much over the course of a day. . . . It’s magnificent and amazing,” Swanson, a parishioner at Christ Episcopal Church in Rochdale, Massachusetts, said in an interview. “The fact that the window is abstract is also great. It’s a kind of hypnotic experience to sit there and look at the window and study it. When you get up close to it, those details are just incredible.”

Rowan LeCompte, a world-renowned stained-glass artist from Baltimore, Maryland, began [designing](#) windows for the cathedral in 1942, when he was 16 years old. He [designed](#) nearly 50 windows over the course of 70 years, including the nearly 30-foot diameter West Rose. LeCompte died in 2014 at 88.

In architecture, [rose windows](#) are large, circular stained-glass works often found in Gothic and Romanesque cathedrals and churches. The windows typically resemble a blooming rose or a wheel.

More than 10,500 pieces of colorful, sparkling glass make up the West Rose, which [incorporates](#) the four Ancient Greek elements—fire, air, water, and earth—to depict the theme of creation. LeCompte spent 2.5 years designing and constructing the window, which is today referred to as the cathedral’s “third great eye.” The window [debuted](#) on April 18, 1976, Easter Day.

“This 30-foot diameter circle inside of a stone wall . . . you’ve got all that intricate tracery in the center. It was a huge challenge for the masons, for the stone carvers, for the stone cutters,” Joe Alonso, the Washington National Cathedral’s head mason, said in the documentary.

“It’s incredible how humans can create amazing things when they put their mind to it,” said Swanson, who’s filmed three documentaries about LeCompte since they met in 2006. Swanson is the director, owner, and president of the multimedia company Global Visions & Associates, Inc.

*The Creation Rose* includes interviews with Randy Hollerith, the cathedral’s dean; Elody Crimi, the cathedral’s photo curator; and LeCompte’s wife and daughters. Archived interviews of LeCompte and Dieter Heinrich Goldkuhle, who made and restored many of the cathedral’s stained-glass windows, are also included in the documentary.

An artificial intelligence-generated voice of LeCompte, created with his family’s permission, is also used in parts of the documentary where his writings are read aloud. This includes a poem about creation care that he wrote. The handwritten poem was found in a file cabinet at Washington National Cathedral while Swanson’s film crew researched the West Rose’s creation process.

“I was just amazed when we found this poem looking through the cathedral’s archives,” said Swanson, who thinks the poem was written in 1976, before the West Rose’s dedication. “The theme’s very appropriate in light of all the environmental discussions that were going on at the time, and the window’s whole theme is the creation story.”

*The Creation Rose* is available to stream through May 31 via PBS.org and the PBS App. PBS stations are also broadcasting the documentary. Check your local listings. —Episcopal News Service