

Rory Kennedy discovers a success story in 'A Boy's Life'

By **STEPHEN SCHAEFER**

Rory Kennedy, youngest of the 11 children of Robert F. and Ethel Kennedy, has inherited not only the unmistakable looks of America's First Family but the clan's social conscience as well.

An award-winning documentary filmmaker and social activist, Kennedy, 34, looks at a troubled, fatherless Mississippi family in "A Boy's Life," which airs tonight on HBO at 7:30.

At first a deceptively simple tale of how a violent, hyperactive 7-year-old named Robert is being raised by his magnanimous granny, "A Boy's Life" achieves unexpected depth and emotional strength as outside forces intervene: a therapist, a teacher, a grade school principal — all women. Robert dramatically improves and



RORY KENNEDY

eventually is reunited with his mother.

Intimate and never judgmental, "A Boy's Life" touches on drug abuse, family dysfunction and religion — issues that are practically universal even if they seem far from Kennedy's life. Kennedy, married to Mark Bailey, her sometimes collaborator and a screenwriter, and the mother of a toddler, 18-month-old Georgia, is a barely visible five months pregnant.

"It's a girl," she said, happily patting her expanding belly.

Sure, she's a child of privilege, but her life has been tempered by tragedy. Born six months after her father's June 1968 assassination, she postponed her wedding to Bailey, 34, when her cousin John F. Kennedy Jr., his wife, Caroline Bessette Kennedy, and her sister, Lauren Bessette, died when their private plane crashed en route to the July 17, 1999, wedding on Martha's Vineyard. The couple wed months later in Athens, Greece, on New Year's Eve.

After filming documentaries on the global AIDS crisis and Appalachia, Kennedy hadn't intended to focus on one boy when she first went to rural Mississippi.

"I'd gone down with the intention of doing something on welfare reform and how it was impacting families who had histories of . . . mental illness," she said.

But a therapist had told her about Robert, born as the result of his mother's rape at 15 and promptly abandoned to his grandmother's questionable care. "I'd heard how this child was in need of help, how he killed four dogs and three cats and tried to commit suicide," she said. "The first scene you see is when we walked into the house, where Robert's banging his head on the wall and running all over the place and can't answer a question. It seemed this child needed support."

Kennedy spent two years making "A Boy's Life."

She smiled at the idea of filming a documentary on her famous cousin by marriage, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"I never have done a documentary on my family and have no plans to," she said. "I've definitely discussed politics with Arnold and love him and think he's a lovely person, but we don't agree. Our politics are very different."