



# the week-in

# TV

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Section E

## Melissa Gilbert grows up in moving *Choices of the Heart*

By Jerry Buck  
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LOS ANGELES (AP) — Melissa Gilbert, an actress since the age of 2½, achieves a double milestone in her newest television film, "Choices of the Heart."

It is the first completely adult role for Miss Gilbert and the first set in contemporary times.

"I made the transition during 'Little House on the Prairie,'" she says, "when I went from daughter to mother. I played my first love story in 'Splendor in the Grass.'"

In "Choices of the Heart," Miss Gilbert plays Jean Donovan, an American missionary who was slain in El Salvador with three Catholic nuns on Dec. 2, 1980. NBC will telecast the two-hour movie Monday.

"WE'D BEEN LOOKING for a script for a long time when this story came to us," says Miss Gilbert, who has her own production company, Half Pint Productions.

"When a script comes to us, my manager, Ray Katz, reads it first. Then my mother reads it. Ray read this and called me and said, 'I won't tell you anything. Just tell me what you think.' I read the script in half an hour and called Ray in tears and said it was perfect. I said I wanted to play this even if I didn't get paid."

The movie tells the story of Jean Donovan and the events that led her to a back road 15 miles from the San Salvador airport, where the church women were stopped and killed. Members of the Salvadoran National Guard have been implicated.

THE ESSENCE of the story, according to NBC, is "the evolution of Donovan from a carousing, man-hungry college student to a deeply committed lay Catholic missionary." A major influence on her is a charismatic priest she meets while studying in Ireland. He is played by Martin Sheen.

"She had everything in life, a good job and material possessions," says Miss Gilbert of the role. "But something was missing. We get to a point where we have to find something in ourselves that makes our lives worthwhile. She began doing charity work, but that wasn't enough. She applied for missionary work and was sent to El Salvador. She finds that's where she belongs. Even when things got dangerous she wouldn't leave. Jean was doing what made her happy."

Miss Gilbert is just back from a vacation in Europe with her mother, Barbara Abeles, and a stopover in New York to see her boyfriend, Rob Lowe ("The Outsiders," "Class"). She has long chestnut hair and at 19 is maturing into a lovely young woman.

She was about to begin work on a "Faerie

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MELISSA GILBERT (left) portrays a lay missionary and Pamela Bellwood is Sister Dorothy Kazel in *Choices of the Heart*, the story of four American churchwomen murdered in El Salvador.

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