



Movie will take God's message world-wide

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Movie executive Derrick Williams and Rev. Todd Burpo said God has played a strategic role in bringing the best-selling book, "Heaven is for Real," to the big screen.

Burpo said God has been strategic in who he's put in place to make the movie a reality.

Williams said the movie will help spread God's global message around the world.

Williams visited Burpo's Crossroads Wesleyan Church Sunday to share some of the behind-the-scene aspects of getting the story to the big screen.

Burpo said he first got a call from director and producer Joe Roth about turning the book into a movie.

Burpo said he had no idea who Roth was. Turns out, Roth was the former chairman of Walt Disney Studios for six years before starting his own studio.

What perplexed Burpo was that Roth, who is Jewish, would want to make a film about Christ.

Roth told him the story of Burpo's son, Colton, who had a near-death experience in heaven, was keeping him up at night. He just had to make the movie.

Williams is executive vice-president for T.D. Jakes Film and Entertainment.

Bishop Jakes is the senior pastor of The Potter's House, a global humanitarian organization and 30,000-member church located in Dallas.

Jakes has made his presence known in Hollywood with eight films to date including the recent hit "Winnie Mandela." "Heaven is for Real" is set for an Easter debut.

Burpo said Roth knew Jakes so he was more comfortable in having the movie made.

The involvement of Roth and Jakes in the project got the attention of Hollywood studios.

Williams said the picture has been picked up by Sony Pictures and will be distributed first in the U.S. and then world-wide. They plan to translate the movie into several different languages.

Devon Franklin, a studio executive at Sony, is yet another example of God's hand in the movie.

Franklin is also a minister and preaches regularly. He has also been to Burpo's church as a guest for their men's retreat several years ago.

The movie's director, Randall Wallace, wrote the screen epic "Braveheart" and directed "Secretariat," "The Man in the Iron Mask," and "We Were Soldiers."

What's more important, Williams said, is that Wallace is a believer. He attended divinity school and has hosted church in his own home.

Learning the story

Burpo and his wife, Sonja, said the stars in the film, Greg Kinnear, who plays Todd, and Kelly Reilly, who plays Sonja, wanted to learn more about them and Colton's story.

Todd said he spent several hours online, Skype-ing with Kinnear, as the two got to know each other better.

The couple also met personally with Reilly, who drilled Sonja with questions about her.

The Burpos feel the pair will be perfect for the film, just like the young boy, Connor Corum, who will play Colton.

"When we saw Connor, we knew they had nailed it," Todd said.

Williams said the movie does a great job of portraying life in Imperial. Although the movie was filmed in Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada, Williams said the love of family and community shines through.

"I think you will be really pleased with how Imperial is portrayed," Williams said.



Anticipation growing

The Burpos will get to see the movie for the first time next week at a screening in Los Angeles.

Williams said he's seen the first cut of the movie and said it exceeded his own expectations.

He also noted a special focus group screening was held recently in Phoenix and feedback again exceeded expectations.

Williams said the movie tells a powerful story and more importantly, will spread God's message to the world.