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"The Masked Saint" Unmasked Pro-Wrestler Turns... Pastor?

By Kerry Nenn

Convincing sermons often "pin us to the mat." One pastor has taken this idea literally. While Jacob may have wrestled with God, Chris Whaley wrestled for God. This "Masked Saint" stood in the pulpit on Sunday mornings, and in the wrestling ring on Saturday night. In Pastor Whaley's case, he did "wrestle against flesh and blood" – a lot of it.

Brett Granstaff's award-winning film, "The Masked Saint," shares the remarkable story of this surprising man, both pastor and pro wrestler.

In an interview with Faith Filled Family Magazine, Chris provided the ring-side scoop on his life story and the movie that tells it. Tag-teaming to give fur-



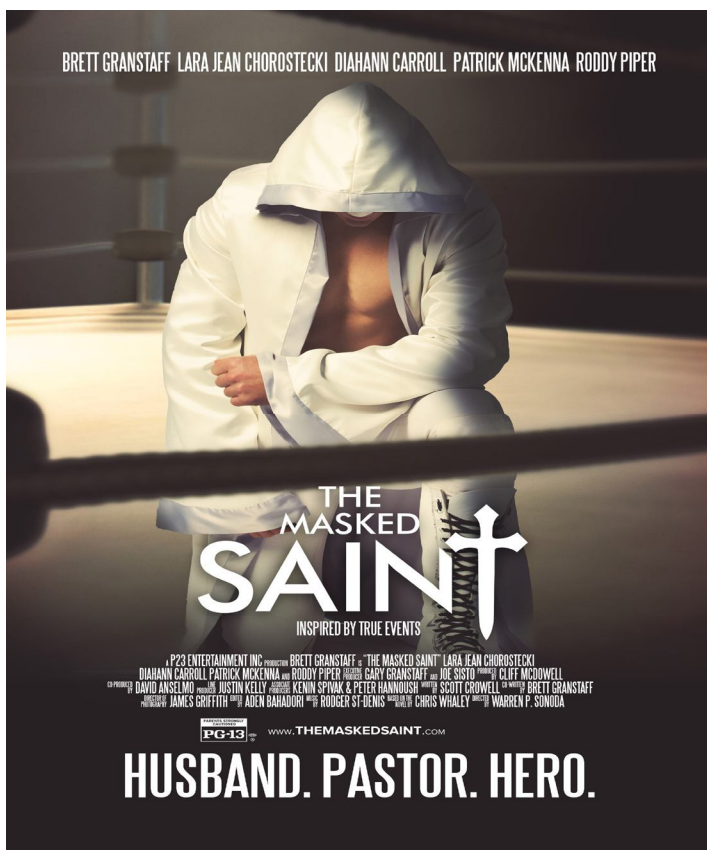
ther insight into the movie is Brett Granstaff, writer of the film and star of "The Masked Saint."

Chris, how does a person transition from wrestler to pastor?

It's amazing. I was already in the ministry before I got into wrestling. I wrestled the entire time I was in seminary. Just before I started wrestling, I was really working out hard in the gym and was in great shape. I saw an ad in the paper wanting pro wrestlers. I had more time on my hands than I was used to having. I answered the ad.

Chris, were you always into wrestling?

When growing up, I was in and out of the hospital every year until junior high school. I had pneumonia almost every year. In fourth grade, I had polio. I was in the hospital for three months. When in the hospital, I could not sleep because of fevers and other symptoms. When I was awake at night, I would turn the TV on, and that was when pro wrestling was on. I got hooked on it. My dad would



take me to wrestling matches. I was a wrestling fanatic, so when I saw the ad, I said that's for me. I got hooked the moment I walked in.

Chris, in the movie, the Masked Saint becomes a bit of a masked vigilante. Did you really beat up street thugs? Ever body slam the church body?

I didn't put a mask on and go out at night but did have my share of physical encounters with people. A young lady came in one Sunday with sunglasses on. When she approached me after service, crying, I removed the sunglasses, and she had two black eyes. I told her I was going to visit her husband. She warned me not to. I went to their house. I didn't hit him, but told him that I would come back and see how he did against someone who could hit back if I ever saw another mark on his wife. He never hit her again. That was how it got started. I had several events that took place while I was there that I didn't handle the way a pastor would normally handle. The basketball court scene in the movie is based on similar events that occurred on the softball field in real life.

Chris, what do you hope viewers take away from your story?

I hope they take away that we serve an awesome God - the God of a second chance. I certainly had my share of second chances, and I'm so thankful for that. I have served three congregations who loved me warts and all, which is great because that's how God loves us too.

I also think the things I fought for were worth fighting for. My humanity entered into a couple of them, but Psalm 82:3 says to defend the weak and fatherless. I think there is such a thing as righteous indignation, to be angry about things that make God angry. Any time those who are not able to protect themselves, someone has to help protect them. Not always in the way I did it, but I wouldn't change anything. I helped people, and that's part of what I do as a pastor - to protect the people God has given me to care for.

Brett, what do you view as the main message of the film?

We hit on everything. Honor. Redemption. Pride is a slippery slope. The big one for me though is redemption, and how pretty much everyone

is redeemable no matter where they are. All the people in the film - they all have things going on in their lives, but by the end they are all redeemed. Everyone takes away something different from the film. There is a "don't be a bully" aspect. We have strong women characters. Instead of hitting one central theme, we hit on a lot of areas. Depending on where you are in your life, you can take away something different.

How did this story become a movie?

Brett: When I first heard about this story, I was intrigued. He's a pastor and a professional wrestler, and doesn't always turn the other cheek. He would hold charity events that involved wrestling. He intervened in a couple robberies and saved a woman in a parking lot. God put him in the right place at the right time. It's such a unique story, and I really wanted to tell it.

Chris: When I wrote the book based on my life, I was just hoping that I might get someone to look at it for a possible TV series. Michael Landon inspired me. He was the only one who was putting anything moral and good on TV. No one else was doing that after he died. I was hoping to do a series. I couldn't get any publishers to talk to me. I self published the book. The movie was a long pro-

cess, so long that while the producer was considering it I had put it on the shelf and forgotten about it. Then he called me in February of 2013 and told me they were going to make it into a movie. This was amazing to me that they were going to make my book into a movie. I was thrilled to death.

Brett, how has this movie impacted the spiritual lives of those involved in its making?

This character is always in the right place at the right time (or wrong, depending on how you see it.) For me personally, it has made me more aware of my surroundings, less shy, and less prone to keep my head down and do my own thing. I now always look twice around me, to see if there is anything going on. Maybe God has put me in that particular place at that time to act.

Brett, what was the biggest challenge of playing The Masked Saint?

I did all my own stunts. I was trained by the man who plays the Reaper in the film. Everyone says wrestling is fake, but there is nothing fake about wrestling. You still hit the mat and ropes and get slammed. What you have to put your body through is tough. We filmed five matches over three days. One match we filmed 14 times for different scenes and angles. I've never done that much stunt work.

As an actor, the hardest thing was how to get the two roles of pastor and wrestler together. Looking from the outside, it seems like a strange concept. As a wrestler, I have to play to the audience, and as a pastor, I have to look after the flock. Rationalizing pro wrestler and pastor was difficult.

Brett, in what ways did God show up during the making of this film?

The fact that we filmed it in 15 days was a miracle. Also, twice during production, financing completely fell apart. We ended up having people come in and say "we like this film, and we will make it happen." Twice. If this had not happened, we would not have the film.

With as much wrestling as we did, it was shocking that no one was seriously injured. We did a lot of stunt work. The stunt coordinator was surprised that no one got hurt, even with pros-only moves and intense action. No one was hurt at all. It worked out. The fact that we finished on time

and on budget was God showing up. Everyone was amazing, but there was definitely some higher help for sure. We missed major snow storms. Little things like that, which, looking back, easily could have been really bad. The whole production itself was really blessed.

What else would you like readers to know about this film?

Chris: I am so thrilled that faith-based movies are doing well. However, if we continue to make the same kind of faith-based movies, it's going to grow old. Most are salvation movies, but it's predominantly Christians who are going to see them. Why can't we just have some great clean Christian films of different genres? I see this as the first faith-based action movie.

I think people want to see good clean films they can take their kids to. I think that's why they are so popular. Families can go and see them together. I hope that people will enjoy it because it 's a good Christian film with good triumphing over evil.

Brett: The movie has an incredible cast. Diahann Carroll plays a church elder. She truly is a legend. The late Roddy Piper did an amazing job in it. The movie won Best Picture at the 2015 International Christian Film Festival. It also received three other nominations, making it the most nominated movie of any film there.

Everyone from a five-year-old kid to an 85-year-old grandmother can enjoy the movie. There is something for everyone. It truly doesn't matter your age or what you enjoy. You will find something in this film that you will gravitate to.

Brett, when and where can we see "The Masked Saint"?

It will be released January 8, 2016. The release will be nationwide, on 600 screens in most major cities.

For more behind the scenes info, check out www.themaskedsaint.com. Watch the trailer, get to know the actors and their characters, and view inspirational pieces from the film.

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