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## 'Soul Surfer' stays faithful to Bethany Hamilton's Christian, surfing ideals

**The real-life story of Hamilton's recovery from a shark attack embraces the family's faith and takes pains to show the professional side of surfing.**

By Nicole Sperling, Los Angeles Times

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In the opening scene of the new film "Soul Surfer," young Bethany Hamilton (AnnaSophia Robb) finishes a morning session on the waves off the north shore of Kauai, Hawaii, quickly throws on a modest sundress over her bikini and hurries to join her family at a beachside church service where the congregation sings a hymn called "Blessed Be Your Name."

The scene succinctly encapsulates the priorities of the film's protagonist, yet it's rare for a Hollywood production to so openly embrace any faith for fear of offending potential audience members who might believe differently.

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### FOR THE RECORD:

Surfer: An article on the film "Soul Surfer" in the April 7 Calendar section said that surfer Bethany Hamilton lost her right arm to a shark. She lost her left arm. —

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But the filmmakers behind "Soul Surfer," which opens in wide release Friday, are hoping that the inspiring life story of Hamilton — the professional surfer and devout Christian who, in 2003, at the age of 13, lost her right arm in a tiger shark attack but returned to the sport only months later — will attract a broad cross section of audiences drawn to her tale of perseverance and courage.

"It was always my focus to do a mainstream movie ... but I was never going to shy away from the fact that she's a Christian," said director-producer Sean McNamara, a surfing enthusiast with an extensive television résumé. "We aren't hiding anything."

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McNamara began working on the film six years ago after reading Hamilton's memoir; he's also one of four credited writers on the film's screenplay. Even if he had wanted to downplay the story's Christian underpinnings, he might have run into some roadblocks.

The Hamilton family was involved in every stage of the \$18-million film, from script rewrites to production duties; they were a constant presence on the movie's Hawaii set. Bethany even served as Robb's body double in the wide surf shots and persuaded the production to spend additional money for a quick trip to Tahiti to capture better waves.

The Hamiltons made it clear that they would only lend their support if the film honored their faith and featured surfing that professionals would respect.

"Faith is usually removed [from movies] and surfing is usually butchered and super corny," said Hamilton, 21, sitting cross-legged in a sleeveless dress in a hotel lounge just hours before the film's late-March premiere at the Cinerama Dome in Hollywood. "It wasn't a fight to keep the faith in the movie. They were really receptive to hearing our feedback. Every time we gave it they took it and most of the time they kept it. It was really a blessing to not have to battle."

Apart from the opening sequence, "Soul Surfer" includes one scene in which singer Carrie Underwood, making her feature film acting debut as the leader of Hamilton's church youth group, quotes a biblical passage that served as a source of comfort to the family after the attack. In another shot, Dennis Quaid, who plays Bethany's father, Tom, is reading a Bible — and quoting from it — as he sits by his injured daughter's bedside.

Those moments should play well to the Christian community, which embraced 2008's Kirk Cameron-starrer "Fireproof," a faith-based film that cost less than \$1 million to produce and earned close to \$34 million in theaters. Affirm Films, Sony Pictures' faith-based division, helped shepherd that project and others like it. With "Soul Surfer," though, they are targeting a much wider swath of the movie-going public.

The division's vice president, Rich Peluso, worked closely with McNamara and the Hamilton family to strike the right balance with the screenplay and the final cut of the movie, with an eye toward releasing something that would appeal to churchgoers and mainstream audiences.

"We had lots of honest and open discussions," said Peluso, who's been working on the movie for the last two years. "How do we achieve what we want but not cross the line and make it too preachy and too Christian?"

Similarly, McNamara and company edited together many different versions of the shark attack before settling on a cut that in McNamara's words "gives parents time to cover their kids' eyes" before the giant beast bites Hamilton. "This is not a shark movie," McNamara said of the PG-rated film. "It's about her recovery."

"Soul Surfer" is the second feature from FilmDistrict, which last week released the low-budget horror movie "Insidious" to solid box office; the company is partnering with Sony's Tri-Star division to

distribute McNamara's telling of Hamilton's story.

President of distribution Bob Berney, the veteran marketer who has a history of selling religious-themed films such as "The Passion of the Christ" to diverse audiences, said his approach to marketing "Soul Surfer" was simple: "This movie is a broad family movie that girls are going to like."

"We really looked at the film. It's got a strong faith message built into the underlying story but the movie itself didn't fit into the 100% targeted Christian audience like 'Fireproof,'" Berney said.

It was Berney's call to include the shark attack in every trailer and TV spot for the movie, though there is little mention of Hamilton's religion in the ads. Rather, Berney focused on capturing the attention of young girls, even licensing the popular Katy Perry song "Firework," a track that's close to an anthem for tweens.

The question now is who will turn up to see "Soul Surfer." Tracking data suggests that the film might have difficulty pulling in anyone other than young girls, but McNamara is optimistic that the movie's uplifting spirit will have the same kind of resonance as the top-tier inspirational sports dramas that he loves.

"For me, this movie is my 'Rocky,' " McNamara said. "I was never going to be a boxer but it inspired me to do something with myself. Everyone should be able to watch this film and walk away with something."

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