

Making Waves

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by Bill Delapp

Syracuse native Dominic Ianno hangs 10 with Hollywood to help produce *Soul Surfer*

The true story of teen surfer Bethany Hamilton, who triumphed over adversity when a shark attack took her left arm on Halloween 2003 in Hawaii, seemed tailor-made for the movies, especially when Hamilton's 2004 autobiography, *Soul Surfer*, became an instant best seller. The film adaptation is finally here, with AnnaSophia Robb (Because of *Winn-Dixie*, *Bridge to Terabithia*) in the lead role, plus Dennis Quaid and Helen Hunt as Bethany's surfing parents and the film debut of country singer Carrie Underwood in the pivotal role of Bethany's religious counselor.

Still, it took a while for *Soul Surfer* to begin production, and it's safe to say that executive producer Dominic Ianno helped spur things along. The name Ianno might not seem familiar

to *Syracuse New Times* readers, but everyone in the office knew the name's importance: Dominic's dad Victor Ianno kept the pages coming as president of Skaneateles' Lakeside Printing, which printed *The New Times* for many years.

Dominic logged time at the printing operation while pursuing his education, including a diploma from Liverpool High School in 1986, a bachelor's from Carnegie Mellon in 1990 and an MBA from Harvard Business School in 1995. A varied career that included online ventures, strategic planning and deal consultations soon followed, and now he's the founder and CEO for Indomitable Entertainment, with offices in New York City and Los Angeles, and a slate of films and Broadway shows in the pipeline.

Ianno was taken with the emotional pull of the Bethany Hamilton story and helped orchestrate the complex funding for the project. Sony Pictures, which is releasing *Soul Surfer* through its TriStar distribution arm, was also impressed: The movie will open in close to 2,000 multiplex screens on Friday, April 8. Syracuse gets a sneak peek of the movie on Tuesday, April 5, at Eastwood's Palace Theatre, 2384 James St. Ianno originally conceived the screening as a family-and-friends affair, but it soon mushroomed into a Make-A-Wish Foundation of Central New York fundraiser with promotional assistance from the *Syracuse New Times*. Tying Make-A-Wish with Bethany's true-life struggle seemed like an appropriate union for Ianno, who declares, "There wasn't a better organization that was a better fit for the message of this movie."

Next Tuesday's seating begins at 6 p.m., then the 106-minute movie follows at 6:30 p.m. A question-answer session with Ianno, executive producer David Tice and director Sean McNamara takes place after the screening. For details, call 475-9474 or visit www.cny.wish.org. Dominic Ianno's family will be attendance, too, especially his old-school businessman dad, and judging from the recent phone interview with the executive producer, the apple doesn't fall very far from the tree.

Q: *Soul Surfer* has been in development for a long time. When did you get involved with it?

A: It was around March a couple of years back. I was involved with an investor named David Tice out of Dallas, and David had connected with some of the producers. David actually brought me in to help structure his financing for it and we got involved and David became one of the



Hawaiian eyes: Bethany Hamilton and her screen counterpart AnnaSophia Robb from *Soul Surfer*.

biggest investors in the movie

Q: As an executive producer, how do you go about getting financing for this movie?

A: This project was independently financed. Normally a movie will have some money from a bank, some from foreign sales, and an equity source and also tax credits. So for this movie there was a Hawaiian investor and our investor put equity into the picture.

Q: It seems like you need an MBA to get something like this going!

A: Yeah, it can be complicated and challenging, that's for sure.

Q: Has Sony Pictures always been involved in this movie?

A: Sony first got involved because of its faith-based label Affirm Films, which made a picture called *Fireproof* which was very successful. {The 2008 drama starring Kirk Cameron was filmed on a \$500,000 budget and grossed more than \$33 million}. So the executives at Sony Affirm thought, "Well, geez, this movie {*Soul Surfer*} could be much bigger than that" and got involved. And Sony made a partnership with this company called FilmDistrict, where this guy named Bob Berney {named as president of its theatrical division in October 2010} had done {the previous marketing campaigns for the independent box-office smashes} *The Passion of the Christ* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.

It was a dream scenario for us that Sony's engine would be the distribution partner but FilmDistrict would control the marketing and theatrical release of the movie. So we basically have a world series team of marketers to work on this for us.

One of the reasons we got excited about investing is that we felt that this movie would play in the faith market because of Bethany's deep belief, which is very true. She's a very Christian girl in real life and she does a lot of public speaking. There are a lot of people who talk the talk but Bethany really walks the walk. She really did go to Thailand for outreach for {the Christian relief organization} World Vision {following the December 2004 tsunami}, she really did go meet with war veterans, as you see at the end of the movie {during the final credits}, so we felt that the message would be something that the faith community would embrace.

Yet at the same time, given Bethany's global popularity, that she surfs all over the world and that her story is so universally known, we felt that we had something that would work on both the mainstream and the faith sides. So that made us feel a little more comfortable with investing {in the project}.

Q: The movie poster, with star AnnaSophia Robb clutching a surfboard, is really interesting. It looks like a surfing movie until you realize that there's a huge chomp taken out of the surfboard.

A: Actually, that's an important point.

We are selling a movie about determination. Surfing is certainly a part of the mechanism, but really you've got this girl who overcame so much hardship and realized there was so much more important things in the world than herself. It is a true story and Bethany is actually the real deal, so I was pleased when the poster came out and how it captured the steely determination in her eyes. It was absolutely perfect.

Q: Did you have involvement with some of the casting choices?

A: As executive producers we certainly had meaningful input and we were ultimately the ones writing the checks, so we had to be comfortable and have approval.

Q: How did Carrie Underwood become involved in the project?

A: We were looking for someone to play the role of Sarah, Bethany's real-life camp and religious counselor, and we heard that she was looking to do a movie. It became the perfect confluence of events to get Carrie and she did a great job in her first role.

Q: Was there an attempt to keep a consistent tone throughout the movie? There are moments of intensity during the shark attack sequence and yet it's still a family movie.

A: It was tough, it took time. There were a lot of professional writers involved, and Sean McNamara did a great job as a director. There are four producers credited on this as well, and a lot of these guys have deep experience and we agonized over a lot of the questions about getting that tone right. Because if it was too easy for Bethany, then it wouldn't seem real to the story and it wouldn't make a good movie. These things really happened, but our primary target is young girls and so we needed to tell a story that was appealing to adults yet not too threatening for children. So it was a balance that we had to achieve.

Q: Were you in Hawaii for some of the shoot?

A: I was down there for a couple weeks, I actually learned to surf there. I got up on the board for the very first time and I was thrilled.

Q: Your father, Victor Ianno, printed the Syracuse New Times for many years. Did you work alongside him at Lakeside Printing?

A: I grew up working with my dad. He was a great influence on my life and so I kind of learned how to be an entrepreneur from my dad; he was first at Scotsman Press and then ultimately at Lakeside Printing. I worked on the press, the trimmer, the baler, I worked as a delivery boy, in accounting, in sales. My brother {Victor Jr.} and I both did {all these tasks} and so we learned how to run a business.

Actually, I used to sell newspapers on weekends at the Carrier Dome. My grandfather was a paper distribution manager for *The Post-Standard* and *Herald Journal* years and years ago and so he had the contract and he managed the kids selling the newspapers in front of the Dome during the games and concerts. One of my big lessons as a movie producer was how to sell, and I learned that standing outside in 30-below weather with four feet of snow while selling papers for 20 cents.

Q: Were there any hangouts you visited during your teen years?

A: Sure, we used to go to malls. I played football and wrestled in high school. I was also a golfer and we used to go to the course at Lakeshore Country Club. My family had a Winnebago and we traveled a lot in that. I learned a lot of lessons about producing and managing clients and people while being a golf caddy at Lakeshore for years. It's funny what you can learn from a newspaper route and being a golf caddy that's still with me today.

Q: Do you have any favorite movies?

A: Oh God, I'd have to say *The Princess Bride*, *Say Anything*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Braveheart* and *The American President*, just to name a few. {A subsequent email added even more flicks, *Rudy*, *Rocky* and *October Sky*, the types of uplifting against-all-odds movies that Ianno would like to make.}

Q: Did you really think back in 1986 when you were getting out of Liverpool High School that you were going to end up in the movie business? Was that a goal?

A: Nope, it wasn't then. You know, I wanted to work with my dad, and because I was staring at the printing press with this image coming out I got excited about advertising and selling ideas. Then along the way I was in marketing and I really got passionate about the premise that an idea could have broad global appeal. I grew up in a family of Italians who all love and live and laugh, and I just love telling stories, so one day I woke up and said, "Geez, I want to be a writer." {Laughs} Then I realized the economics about being a writer in Hollywood, that it would take me 10 years before I got my first check, so I ended up using my finance skills to help me break into the business.

I have developed a bunch of concepts for movies I'm developing right now, so I use my finance ability to executive produce and then I can become involved in the creative process along the way. And the writing will come along for me someday. But look, Hollywood is the major league for selling ideas and there really was no other choice. I've actually moved back to New York City, but I keep an office and apartment in both cities, and I commute—I'm in New York for three weeks {each month} and one week in LA—and with the world being a global marketplace I travel to where the deals are and where the money is. So I was in LA 42 times last year, I go to London six times a year, and I keep teams on both coasts, so we're working hard around the clock.



Q: Your logo for Indomitable Entertainment seems like a cross between Steven Spielberg's Amblin graphic and The Lion King.

A: We launched the business the day Bear Stearns crashed. We had no idea the recession was coming and there was a tidal wave coming toward us and everyone else running out of the water and screaming "Run!" and we were the only ones heading into the wave. So we liked the idea of a little boy taming a lion.

Q: The Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB) site reveals that your nickname is Kid Italy.

A: {Laughs} That was a college nickname from friends being of Italian descent, the name kind of found itself.

Hawaiian eyes: Bethany Hamilton and her screen counterpart AnnaSophia Robb from Soul Surfer.

Reel deal: **Dominic Ianno, an executive producer on Soul Surfer, has Salt City connections.**

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