

Saints of Our Lives

They're beautiful, and they're bold—about their faith. Some of daytime drama's brightest stars shine for Jesus in the world of soap operas.

Jamie-Lyn Bauer is an intercessor. Austin Peck seeks to find God's perfect will in every contour of his life. Julianne Morris has a passion for overseas missions. Kirsten Storms refuses to take the Lord's name in vain. Hunter Tylo boldly tells everyone who will listen about her relationship with Jesus. Scott Reeves views his vocation like a ministry.

It is not surprising to find such spiritually focused characteristics among churchgoers, but these Christians are also stars on daytime-TV soap operas.

As members of an unlikely but growing cast of believers on the Hollywood scene, their impact for the gospel is showing up both on and off the screen. They all are part of a deeper plot than what viewers see unfolding on the sets of *Days of Our Lives*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *The Young and the Restless* and others.

Perhaps it is ironic that a deeply devoted troop of actors, writers, producers, administrators and stagehands populate this particular TV genre—famous for power-grabbing and greed- and lust-driven storylines that extol duplicity, scandal and revenge. But these believers are not debating whether or not a Christian should “run in the soaps crowd.” They are on Hollywood's frontlines and in studio back lots leading co-stars and crew members to the Lord, bathing studios in prayer, and solidifying real-life blowups and heartbreaks.

Charisma interviewed a number of these brave believers to hear in their words what it's like to be a Christian in Hollywood. Not surprisingly, we found that they face temptations and make mistakes—while being criticized by believers and nonbelievers alike who disagree with their stand for God in the entertainment industry.

They told us God is using them right where they are. And more than ever, they believe, it is the right time to share God's love with Hollywood professionals.

"Before, it was just getting people saved. Now we are equipping, encouraging and covering them," says Bauer, a former star on Days of Our Lives. "It is a very exciting time to be a Christian in Hollywood."

A Christian Soap Opera?

It's past midnight and the 23-hour-long shoot for a Days of Our Lives special has taken a dangerous turn. The script calls for a fire that forces Laura Spencer-Horton (played from 1990-1999 by Jamie-Lyn Bauer) to flee from the psychiatric hospital where she has been institutionalized.

The scene has been carefully choreographed, and firemen stand by to guarantee safety on the set. But something goes awry. A blazing 6-foot-long beam crackles and shimmies, then suddenly, ripping from its overhead moorings, plunges downward directly toward Jamie-Lyn and her co-star.

This predicament is not in the script. Instinctively, and almost audibly, Jamie-Lyn prays in tongues.

“By the grace of God, we were not hit,” she says. “I know that God was there. I wouldn’t be surprised if the enemy was, too. Satan probably was not very happy that I was on the show.”

This was not the first or last time Jamie-Lyn sought God’s presence while at Days’ Burbank, California, studio. In fact, each day while she drove the short distance from her North Hollywood home to the TV lot, she interceded.

“I would plead that His blood would be everywhere I would go,” she recounts. “This was my territory, God’s territory. I would pray for divine order on the set. I prayed for His manifest authority to be present.”

She sounds like intercessory leaders Cindy Jacobs, Chuck Pierce or Frank Damazio firing up attendees at a spiritual warfare conference, not someone who has spent most of two decades acting in soaps, movies and stage plays. But following the prodding of her spiritual mentors—who include Jacobs, Pierce and Damazio—Jamie-Lyn accepts her spiritual role in Hollywood.

As a Days cast member, her dressing room became her prayer closet, and God answered in a dramatic fashion.

She took spiritual authority over the psychic readings sought by co-stars and the horoscopes read each day in makeup. The activities disappeared.

She fervently pleaded for the salvation of every cast and crew member and asked God to bring more Christians to the show. Some were saved. More solid believers joined the cast.

She asked God to bless Days of Our Lives and its executive producer, Kenneth Corday. The show strengthened its reputation. It became known as being a good place to work, having a cast who were like family, exhibiting comparatively minimal in-fighting, and standing as America's favorite and most-watched daytime soap.

Jamie-Lyn has not been God's sole representative on the program. Through the years He has placed other believers in key roles to buoy it with prayer. Notably, administrator and "show mother" Nancy Lewis and sound-man Jim Thomas have gained respect and acceptance as believers and co-workers.

"At times I felt all alone [as a Christian on the program]," says Lewis, who is the assistant to the head writer and wife of film producer John Lewis. "But now it is great. There are so many Christians here. It is wonderful to be able to have someone who understands and who I can pray with."

In fact, in recent years the number of regular actors on Days of Our Lives who profess Jesus as Lord has multiplied, including Austin Peck (Austin Reed), though he is leaving the show this spring; Julianne Morris (Greta Von Amburg); Melissa Reeves (Jennifer Horton); Kirsten Storms (Belle Black); Brian Ditello and Suzanne Rogers.

"God has these people placed in the right places at the right time," Julianne Morris says.

Don't get the wrong picture. Days of Our Lives has not become a Christian soap, nor is this likely to happen. Kidnappings, switched babies, backstabblings and the like still fill Days' daily episodes, as they have for more than

30 years.

Yet many characters mention God, and miracles occur in the fictionalized Days city of Salem. Once, a baby rose from the dead. Habitat for Humanity has been worked into scripts. The character Eric Brady is part of a Bible study.

"While there is a lot of other stuff that goes on, characters pray, and there is always a sense of God," Julianne says. "There is a basis on God, and that is nice."

In fact, the show's name comes from Psalm 23: "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life [*italics added*], and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (NIV).

A GQ Model Finds God

In 1995 a young, brash, former GQ model and amateur boxer named Austin Peck joined the Days cast. Austin quickly rose to the top of soaps' heartthrob barometer as the jaunty, daring Austin Reed. He and co-star Christie Clark earned the Soap Digest 1997 badge for hottest romance of the year. Off-screen, Peck's life sizzled as much as any on-screen soap exploit.

"I smoked pot. I did everything. I was way off-center," he says.

Yet, long before the San Francisco native's network debut, God had begun the process of getting his attention. As a child, Austin heard booming warnings of an impending hell set aside for sinners.

Years later, while on a modeling assignment in Zurich, Austin asked God tough questions about life and death. To his surprise, the answers came in a clear, inner voice and made sense. Later, while walking through New York's East Village, Austin talked to God about his career—even committed it to Him—yet he still spent plenty of time on the wild side living a real-life spiritual tug-of-war.

God did not concede, however. Austin's sister, Casey, started reading the Bible to the young actor over the phone. When he first arrived as a cast member for *Days*, Jamie-Lyn, Nancy and Jim were there, rushing him to the top of their prayer lists.

In September 1997, God spoke to him.

"He told me, 'Austin, I see your heart, but you don't know My Son,'" he recounts. "That got my attention. I started reading the Bible. All of a sudden the words jumped off the page and became real." Almost immediately the sinner's prayer followed, and Austin's life hasn't been the same.

The next day at lunch, he noticed a new actor, Paige Rowland, saying grace over her meal. On the way to makeup Austin approached her and introduced himself as a Christian.

"He is phenomenal," says Paige, who attends Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. "From the moment he was saved he shamed me [as a bold believer]. He was on fire from the moment he started. Everyone on the set could see it."

This spiritual passion has curried Austin some great moments—which have included leading co-star Brian Ditello to

the Lord—but it also has led to some big headaches.

“I became a Bible-thumping Jesus freak,” he says. “All of a sudden purpose was flooded into my life, and that tornado inside my chest calmed down, and I felt like I was full. I had to tell everyone.”

On the set, Austin and co-star Julianne Morris have become friends.

“When he messes up a line, I will lay hands on him,” Julianne says. “Of course, [the other cast members] have no idea what I’m doing, but Austin and I know.”

Austin describes his character as a seeker who “wants to best person he can morals not sleep around.” In one episode, Reed prayed for a baby who was in a coma, and the child recovered.

“The baby rose from the dead—right on Days, and then [Reed] becomes self-righteous. Isn’t that just like some of us?” Austin says.

Austin and his wife attend Oasis Christian Center in Los Angeles, and he says he has matured as a Christian.

“I was pretty strong. I think I scared one [co-star] and once [an actor from another show] said I was all over him [sharing the gospel] when we were waiting at the airport,” Austin says. “I look at how on-fire I was and see that I am just as much on-fire now, but more on the inside.”

In January he was given notice that his Days contract would not be renewed.

“I could not imagine going through this without faith,” he says. “I have had my private moments, but people keep telling me how well I am handling it. I think that is a witness to others because they know I am a Christian.”

Letting Her Light Shine

Nilavae Morris once prayed three hours for her daughter Julianne’s audition, until Julianne called to say she had gotten the part.

“She is always praying for me and everyone on the show,” says Julianne, who was on The Young and the Restless before she made her debut on Days of Our Lives.

Julianne was raised in Windermere, Florida, near Orlando, and her father is Christian writer and former evangelist Max Morris. She grew up attending Pentecostal churches and is now active at Hollywood Presbyterian Church, where several ministries directed specifically at the entertainment industry are based.

“I am a Christian first and then an actor,” says Julianne, who has been active in overseas missions trips when not acting. “I feel this is the door God has opened. This is where He wants me.”

Julianne was a child actor and attended drama school in New York City before moving to California. Before breaking into

Days she was cast in the lead of a South African TV series titled Sinbad.

Christian actors often talk about what lines they can cross in their roles, and Julianne discovered hers when she was asked to lead a séance in an episode of Sinbad.

“I read the script the night before and started crying. I just didn’t know how I could do it,” she says. “[The next day] I walked off the set and went back to my dressing room. I wasn’t a diva or anything, but [shooting the scene] went against every single fiber in me.”

During five months of filming, Julianne had been a vibrant, kind presence on the set, befriending and helping co-stars and crew members.

“I had let my light shine,” she says. “So when it came to the séance, and I could not do it, they were nice about it.

“Sometimes we find ourselves doing what maybe wasn’t part of God’s original plan or what God really wanted us to do. But even in the midst of that it is amazing how He’s so gracious to stand by us and, like Scripture says in Romans 8:28, ‘All things work together for good to those that love the Lord, to those who are called according to His purpose.’”

Julianne has not had any significant problems with her character, Greta Von Amburg, on Days of Our Lives. But she, like most Christians interviewed for this article, would not take God’s name in vain or act in a sex scene.

“Sure, a lot of myself comes out [in Greta],” says Julianne, who is leaving the show this spring to pursue prime-time roles. “She is so sweet, but there are lots of choices Greta would make that are different than mine. That is what acting is. I hope I would be a little smarter about men.”

A Teen Role Model

Fifteen-year-old Kirsten Storms had just been cast as Belle Black when Jamie-Lyn Bauer was seeing the close of her stint on *Days of Our Lives* in 1999. Kirsten was assigned to Jamie-Lyn’s dressing room—and recognized immediately the presence of the Holy Spirit from the years Jamie-Lyn had used the room for prayer.

“My mother and I noticed right away. There are good spirits in this dressing room,” says Kirsten, who has gained fame in Disney movies, including *Zenon: Girl of the 21st Century* for which she won the 1998-1999 Best Performance on a TV Movie or Pilot and a Leading Young Actress award, beating out the likes of Kirsten Dunst and Tegan Moss.

Kirsten grew up in Orlando, Florida, where she attended a Baptist church and later Metro Life Church, an independent charismatic congregation. Her family, including her father, Mike Storms—a NASCAR race announcer and former TV sports anchor in Orlando—moved to California in 1996 to pursue acting opportunities that had opened in Hollywood for Kirsten. They now attend a Vineyard church.

“God places Christians in the entertainment business,” says Kirsten, 17, and one of the most popular characters on *Days*. “He is going to turn lights on in dark places.”

Guiding Lights in Hollywood

Daytime soaps trace their roots to serial fiction from the likes of Charles Dickens and radio serials of the 1930s and 1940s, acquiring their name from the advertisers who sold soap products. The first TV soap aired in the early 1950s and gained popularity in subsequent decades. Today, they are mainstays competing with talk shows and game shows.

Soaps tend to focus on female characters, both bad and good. They reflect on societal issues and tend to clearly define good and evil. And, of course, the stories never end.

This last element allows the scripts to explore the attitudes and emotions around touchy subjects such as AIDS, premarital sex, racial prejudice, homelessness and other real-life issues, which could include Christianity.

“Why not?” Austin Peck says. “There could be a Christian character on a soap. But it would have to be an honest character [who] is allowed to struggle with his faith, stumble, fall and get up again.”

He’s willing to play a bad character if the role is redeeming or shows the ugliness of sin. But, he adds: “[Soaps] are a slice of cannot take them too seriously.”

Soap Digest managing editor Stephanie Sloane has noticed the increasing number of actors who believe in God on the programs.

“There are Christians on all of the shows, but there is a

larger, more vocal contingent on Days,” she says. “Soaps are not all about sex. People who say that do not watch them. They deal with poignant, ongoing stories. Yes, yes, many people have sex. there are consequences.”

So why be a Christian on a soap? Even some of the stars themselves wrestle with the question.

“The day I became a Christian I thought, Oh no, I can’t work on that show anymore. I was horrified,” says Hunter Tylo, a charismatic Christian who stars as Taylor Hayes Forrester on The Bold and the Beautiful. “I was willing to walk away. I prayed about where God wanted me. I said: ‘Lord take this career. I do not want to be a stumbling block for anyone.’”

Hunter walked through the entire CBS studio anointing every room and sound stage with oil. Like Jamie-Lyn, she prayed that God would bring other Christians to the show and the network.

Resolved that God indeed wanted her to stay, Hunter has been able to bring Scripture into several episodes and has shared Christ with co-stars and crew members, even leaving notes and tracts in their mailboxes.

Many of the stars see God’s hand at work in their careers and are careful not to cross the lines in their parts.

Scott Reeves, former star with The Young and the Restless agrees that an actor’s place on the soaps is a position to be taken seriously for Christ.

“How can a Christian be in a soap? I don’t think it is for

another person to judge. It is between God and the person. You know when you are doing something you should not be doing," he says.

Says Julianne Morris: "I am not on a soap to minister to other Christians. I am more concerned about the non-Christians. If I can reach one person for Christ, it is all worth it."

When Life Is More Than Soap Opera

Julianne Morris says abstinence is one role she won't negotiate.

Julianne Morris' first role in a daytime soap was as a 16-year-old on *The Young and the Restless*. The storyline took a turn that challenged her faith as a Christian. It called for her character to lose her virginity.

"I was mortified," Julianne says. "That is such a horrible message."

She tried to reason with the producers and writers.

"I did not go in like a bull in a china shop. I tried to be humble and kind and loving and backed it with facts [about teen pregnancy]," she told *Charisma*.

But the producers had their way, and her character was unable to remain a virgin.

"They were very nice about it and agreed to add several

scenes—several days of me just crying and saying [the pregnancy] was the biggest mistake I'd ever made, that I wanted to wait until I was married and that I wish I had waited.

“But there are a lot of situations where girls lose their virginity and then realize they made a big mistake,” Julianne adds. “So there was a message in it.”

Julianne, who is single and is leaving *Days of Our Lives* this spring, clearly advocates sexual abstinence before marriage.

“I am waiting. It is not always easy, but it is the right thing to do,” she says.

The *Days* star has a strong message for all singles, especially teens. “I believe marriage is ordained by God,” she says. “The Bible teaches quite explicitly that the romantic attachment between a husband and a wife is a parallel to our relationship to God. There could be no stronger indication of its importance.

“The idea of waiting until you are married to have sex is simply an acknowledgment of the power of sex and its unique status. Christians understand exactly how exalted and life-changing it is, which is why we don't advocate treating it as cavalier as getting a manicure.”

Steven Lawson is a veteran journalist based in Southern California. While he does not watch soaps, his late grandmother, Pauline Steves, was a fervent *Days of Our Lives* fan from the show's inception in 1965.