

How the Hand of God Can Unite Even 'The Best of Enemies'

In *The Best of Enemies*, releasing Friday, Taraji P. Henson and Sam Rockwell play fierce nemeses brought together to solve a public school problem in a small North Carolina town in 1971.

The true story centers on Ann Atwater (Henson), an activist for Operation Breakthrough, and C.P. Ellis (Rockwell), the Exalted Cyclops of the Durham Ku Klux Klan, who are drafted to co-chair a charrette, a community meeting designed to end the local school segregation, by Bill Riddick, a Raleigh academic.

Riddick, a man of faith, was a firsthand eyewitness to the unlikely friendship that developed between the two enemies. Looking back, he credits God for the shocking transformation that united two people and propelled the community forward. In this exclusive interview, he explains his memories of the historic event.

You saw firsthand how hearts and lives were changed through this. What was that like?

Each of those individuals came to the charrette with hardened stands. They stood on what they call principles, and they were convinced that it was what they should be doing. And consequently, when we got started the first day, it was just bad. But I had to move beyond my own biases, because I really didn't particularly like either one of them, but my goal was to be successful. I had to do something with my biases that [would] allow them then at least to be able to talk to me and to talk to me in an honest way. I would design something every day for them to put them together, that they had to face each other, and sometimes they were just at the coffee machine or ... something that really wasn't important, but they had to go do it to allow the charrette to be successful.

Along the way, I'm sure there were bumps in the road. Were there times when you kind of doubted the whole process?

About halfway through it, we got to the weekend, and Ann suggested that we do gospel music, and she would invite us over to her church. C.P. didn't like that at all. He just thought that was outrageous. So, he came back to me and said, "Can I put up our uniform for the Klan and our literature? Can I have space to do that?" Well, we had a real fight over that. But I tried to be very fair, and Ann was really upset. And I think that one thing started to allow them to see that we have positions in our lives that are so unnecessary that we as people need to do better. I was trying to respect that experience that they needed to go through by how I treated them.

Where did you see God in the process?

I hate to admit this, but I thought that I was being bright and smart. As I have gotten older and looked back, it was the Lord who just took me in his hands and guided me those 10 days. He put words in my mouth that I hadn't used before and gave me faith. As I looked back at it and with my belief in God, although I wasn't practicing at that time, He did the whole thing. There's no doubt about it.

So, He just orchestrated the whole thing and just used you as a vessel.

He used me as a vessel and, and I'm glad I was obedient.

How hard was it for you personally to kind of put your personal feelings on the back burner for what you thought was the greater good?

I was driven at that time in my life with successes because I was trying to make a living and beyond that, I had a tremendous desire to help people. I've had that kind of job and role all of my life. So, I just decided that if I can, as

I see it today, reduce myself to become a negotiator and allow them to do and interact with one another, I believe there was going to be a good outcome. Now, I had no idea that [they were] going to become best friends. ... That wasn't my wish at all. I didn't see that.

What were your thoughts when you first saw this on film?

I kind of had a shock that it stayed on the truth. I don't know anything about Hollywood, but I had been told that there were other true stories that were glossed over and whatnot. I had input in this. I had input on the writing of the script. I had input at the shooting. So, I've been involved in the film from Day One, even before the first words were written for the script. So, the thing that surprised me was that it stayed on point, it told the truth and I am so glad that we didn't gloss stuff up for a movie.

What do you think would be the best thing that could happen as a result of someone seeing the film?

I've been asked that question a lot of times and I truly believe that if every person who saw this movie would in the next day or two go home and just look in the mirror and ask themselves, "What are my biases that hinder me from getting along with other people?" Some of these people you really don't know. You just have got an attitude against because you heard somebody else say it. I think this country needs a whole group of people who need to say to one another, "I need to be a better person. I need to, to be more caring for other people. I need to treat other people the way I want to be treated." If the movie could just do a little bit of that, then I think for me it would have reached its goal.

Is there anything else that maybe people aren't asking you that you'd like to talk about?

Well, I think the one thing I don't get asked about is how did the whole charrette bring those folks together. And there are

three or four key incidents I think that did that, you know, and one was that some young African-American boys were going to tear down the Klan stuff that C.P. put up, and Ann stopped it. And when I looked out the corner of my eye, C.P. was actually peeping out of the door when she dressed down these guys who were trying to destroy it. And that, that was really a touching moment. And another one when C.P. went to the gospel thing, He knew he couldn't clap in unison with the other people and, it might not have been Ann, but it was somebody who tried to help him clap on rhythm; those two incidents were truly amazing.

The one moment now that is the highlight of the film was [C.P.] ripping up his Klan membership card. That I must have been amazing to see.

I was maybe five feet from him. Just to set that day up for you, it's the last day of the charrette. I asked both of them just to write down some notes and let me have them by late that afternoon as to what they were going to say. And neither one of them did, and I gave them a task that they weren't used to doing. So, they just didn't do it. My first thought was to close the charrette myself and, and, and, and do the talking myself as we go in and decide what it is we're going to decide on. And then I went back to our original plan and gave C.P. the time to speak, and I would have given Ann the same time to speak. He spoke first, and obviously when he told the crowd that we had solved the problem, the charrette to me was over with. So, Ann did not get a chance to speak because half of the audience was angry and the other half was applauding. We had been successful. This charette had said that Durham needed to integrate, fully integrate that school. And that was what I was looking for.

The Best of Enemies, written and directed by Robin Bissell, opens April 5 from STX/Astute Films.

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