

How This Spirit-Filled Director Continues His Family's Famous Spiritual Legacy From Behind a Camera

David Cunningham comes from seven generations of missionaries and ministry workers. If his last name rings a bell, it could be because his parents, Loren and Darlene, founded Youth With a Mission in 1960. It's this incredible spiritual legacy that impacts Cunningham's role in Hollywood as a director. His latest film, *Running for Grace*, stars Jim Caviezel and Matt Dillon in a powerful story about family, adoption, identity, racism and hope. Cunningham recently spoke with Charisma News about his faith, the industry and how the two work together. The film opens Aug. 17 in limited theaters, but will be available on demand on Aug. 20.

Walk me through the story behind your latest film:

I am a father of three kids. We all love movies and hanging out with each other but always have the same challenge of finding a movie we all actually want to see. What ends up happening a lot is everyone goes to their own devices and watches their own show separately. The whole joy of watching together is replaced by binge watching in the dark on your own with some small backlit device. Besides being avid film watchers, we have the privilege of living in Hawaii, where all three of my kids were born and are being raised. We like to do adventures around the island: expeditions to waterfalls, trails and remote beaches. In addition to the diversity of the landscape on Hawaii Island (11 of the 13 climate zones exist on one island), we have some of the most diverse ethnicities in the U.S. I actually grew up in Hawaii as a minority (I am *haole*, aka Caucasian) where most of my friends were Hawaiian

or of mixed race. It was a real gift to grow up that way and has shaped the way I see the world and the kinds of movies I make.

I made *Running for Grace* to bring my family (and hopefully yours) together to experience an uplifting movie with themes of challenges and victories that we can all relate to on a daily basis. I think audiences will be entertained as they are swept away to another time and place and hopefully the importance of identity and the power of adoption will resonate. It is mind-blowing to think that in the 1920s, it was illegal by federal law to be able to adopt a child of mixed race. It was called "racial integrity." The segregated society in Hawaii was meant for control like so many places in the world at that time (and sadly still the case in some places today). *Running for Grace* is about a boy of mixed race who defies all the odds to fight for what is most important to him and changes the whole community around him.

I think one of my favorite days on set was when we were filming a romantic scene high up the mountain on a sunny, clear day. The weather suddenly changed, and a bank of thick fog rolled in. With just a few minutes' notice, we had to switch into an entirely new scene that was scheduled for another day and that was going to require a lot of fog machines and Computer Visual FX. Matt Dillon, Jim Caviezel, Ryan Potter and Nick Boraine shifted gears. The crew raced into action and within minutes we were filming a scene where the volcano had erupted and the "vog" was pouring over the island. The scene turned out epic with no manmade effects needed. That's how magic is captured in movies. You gotta love making movies with those kinds of folks.

We had a blast making this movie with such a talented and fun cast and crew. It was truly a family venture. My wife was the department head for makeup and hair, my kids were extras and stand-ins, and we even filmed part of the movie on our property. After spending many years making movies around the

world (often in many cold and dark places) I feel so blessed to be able to make a movie I care about with my family and friends literally in my own back yard! What? Who gets to do that?

How is your personal faith journey displayed in your work?

Every movie is a major leap of faith (this is my eighth movie to direct) and is very tough. It keeps me on my knees a lot. I am constantly asking for inspiration. Filmmaking is a medium that must be inspired in some regards to connect with audiences. I look to the ultimate inspiration for that touch.

How does your spiritual legacy affect your work?

I have seven generations of ministers and missionaries on one side of the family and four on the other. My great-grandfather started 13 churches out of a covered wagon in the Territory of Oklahoma. My great uncle was a prisoner of war in World War II in China at the hands of the Japanese as he refused to leave his congregation there. My grandmother was the first woman ordained minister in her denomination and my parents started the interdenominational organization of YWAM or Youth With A Mission. I believe I am continuing the family legacy but that my pulpit looks a bit different. My family legacy represents folks who sacrificed much for others. I try to remember that when things get tough.

What do your parents think of working in Hollywood?

They are super supportive and understand that my calling is to influence popular culture for Him.

Many Christians think Hollywood should be boycotted at all costs. What is your response to this?

My father tells the story that in the 1950s, when Bible-based movies were doing very well at the box office, a studio executive reached out to Bible schools and ask them to send

graduates to help write Bible-based movies. One Bible school president wrote back, "I would rather send our graduates to hell than to Hollywood". There was a total rejection of popular culture by much of the faith community. In doing so, we lost influence and authority in one of the most influential spheres in the world. It has taken decades to see changes in that area. I firmly believe we need to engage and create, not sit on the sidelines and judge.

Jim Caviezel has openly talked about persecuted Christians and getting more involved in assisting them. How has he impacted you to consider this?

It was an honor to direct Jim. His role in *The Passion* was polarizing for him in the industry. It cost him much. I admire his courage and conviction.

What sort of prophetic words have guided your career?

There are too many to list. I seek the Lord in what I do on a daily basis and find that "strength will rise when you wait upon the Lord."

Anything else you'd like to add?

I am grateful for your interest and support. I hope the themes in *Running for Grace* of the power of adoption will resonate with your readers. We have been doing benefit red-carpet screenings with our movie, celebrating parents who have adopted and we are carrying that theme into the digital release. We have a way for folks to bless families that have adopted by gifting them an HD download of our movie. Please go to to see where we are playing in theaters and how you can receive and give a digital copy. *Mahalo!*