

Unconditionally True

Known as “Papa Joe” to the hundreds of inner-city families he helps, Joe Bradford has a powerful testimony that reads like a movie. This month his story comes to the big screen via *Unconditional*—a film as inspiring as Papa Joe’s ministry.

Act I: The Setup

Joe Bradford was seething, despite being surrounded by 60 giggling, playful children enjoying their lunches. He sat alone at a table, mentally rehashing the heated exchange he had just had with a drug-addicted mother whose abusiveness had caused her young daughter’s eyes to be swollen shut. As he pondered the heinous events—and the equally horrific stories behind most of the neighborhood children around him—the girl’s older sister approached him. No older than 7 or 8, her eyes held a distinct sincerity about them when she asked a question that took Bradford off-guard: “Will you be my daddy?”

Seconds later, another little girl asked the same thing, followed by a young boy. Before Bradford knew it, almost 30 children had descended on him with this unusual request.

“I’m thinking, ‘Are they joking with me? Did they plan this?’ They were actually looking at me seriously, wondering. They didn’t even ask me what my qualifications were,” he says jokingly. Overwhelmed by the circumstances, Bradford did the only thing he could at the moment: He embraced the children and told them he loved them.

Becoming a father was a misnomer to Bradford, who was raised by a single mother and felt abandoned most of his adolescence.

“My father left my mother when I was in the womb,” he explains. “I grew up feeling abandoned by my father. I never thought I could be an example of a papa to anybody.”

The idea of becoming a father to thousands, then, was asking

the impossible of Bradford. But that night, in biblical fashion, his life and name was forever changed.

“I felt like the Lord told me in my spirit that He was changing my name from just Joe Bradford to Papa Joe,” he explains. Though he felt unprepared to be a dad given his past, Bradford took the Lord’s words as a divine commissioning.

That was in 2005. Today the 51-year-old is affectionately known as “Papa Joe” by the young lives he’s changed in the projects of Nashville, Tenn., in a state where 40 percent of children live in fatherless homes according to He and his wife, Denise, are surrogate parents to some of the city’s most underprivileged children, while their ministry, Elijah’s Heart, works with hundreds of at-risk kids and their parents, providing food, clothing, laptops, uniforms and tutoring programs. Most importantly to Papa Joe, they serve as positive role models while giving these kids the one thing most of their fathers don’t: *time*.

Act II: The Turning Point

Papa Joe certainly never dreamed of becoming a father figure. Yet even more, he and Denise never imagined they would be forced to live in the Preston Taylor projects in downtown Nashville. The middle-class couple had done well until Bradford discovered he had kidney disease in 1997. His condition deteriorated rapidly, forcing him to be on a dialysis machine eight hours a day. After three years, his battle against the disease culminated with a life-saving kidney transplant.

Unfortunately the effort to save Bradford’s life also cost his family everything they owned. Booted from their home and completely broke from the insurmountable medical bills, the Bradfords had little choice but to find housing in the projects. They dreaded moving their three elementary-aged children to a crime-ridden area, but a series of events soon

proved they were divinely sent.

The first day after they moved into Preston Taylor, a deaf and mute girl stood on their front porch and just stared at Joe. Not knowing how to respond, he called Denise, who brought her a Starburst candy. The little girl took it and scurried off, only to return with her brothers. By the end of the week, 50 of the neighborhood children had flocked to the couple's door in search of candy. The Bradfords soon realized they needed to offer more than just sweets.

"I was the type of person who, when going through those neighborhoods, I would lock the doors," Denise admits. "I'm the last person who would ever choose to move there. But when we got there and started to see what was going on, I found that our hearts were arrested."

God obviously had a plan for them in Nashville, but the exact strategy wasn't clear yet. They knew the kids not only needed resources, they also needed to be influenced by adults who cared for them. Having directed choirs for 20 years—Joe plays the saxophone and Denise the piano—it was natural for the couple to use music to spend time with the children.

"We figure we can use what we have—our gifts, our talents—to shine the light of Jesus in these neighborhoods and bring out something that is in them that they don't know," Denise explains. "Everybody doesn't think they sing, but everybody can sing. So whatever your gift is, use it."

They started Unity Choir, which has attracted hundreds of kids and has been featured at the Tennessee National Day of Prayer ceremony for four consecutive years. They also began . (Anointed Christian Theater Inspiring Our Nations), a series of dramatic plays performed at theaters throughout Tennessee. Through the choir and plays, the group highlights the needs of impoverished children living throughout America and raises money to help inner-city families.

Elijah's Heart also spearheads an online education program that offers basic resources and private tutoring to help kids become academically successful.

Act III: Rising Action

Education has always been important to Papa Joe. A bright student, he majored in computer programming while attending the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Though he was raised in church, he fell away from God while in college as his interest in computer hacking increased.

"To me that was backsliding," he says. "Pride began to rise up in my heart because I had power through hacking." On a dare, Bradford successfully hacked into a bank. He was caught and sentenced to eight years in prison. Only two weeks shy of receiving his bachelor's degree and a week after a promising IBM interview, Joe began serving his time.

While in prison, he often found himself in fights defending inmates who were being bullied by other inmates. After almost killing an inmate in a brawl, he was placed in solitary confinement, where he reunited with Christ after experiencing a vision.

"I got hope in solitary confinement, of all places," he says.

Like Joseph in the Bible, Bradford found favor in prison and was released after serving only 18 months of his eight-year sentence. Officials granted him early release because he helped establish the prison system's computer operations. Before leaving, he had helped 30 men earn their GEDs.

Bradford married Denise after getting out of prison, and they've been married for 19 years and have five biological children. Yet after touching hundreds of children and their families through Elijah's Heart, Bradford hoped his tumultuous past was far behind him. So when Jason Atkins, co-founder of Harbinger Media, approached him about making a movie about his

life, Papa Joe was reluctant to agree.

"It frightened me because there are skeletons in my closet," he says. "I've been hiding the fact that I was in prison. I've been hiding the fact that I almost killed someone. I've been hiding the fact that I was a hacker. So [I said], 'Please don't tell the world.'"

Atkins met Papa Joe as a volunteer at Elijah's Heart and admired him. But when God continued to nudge him to ask Bradford about his testimony, potentially to become the first film for his fledgling media company, Atkins was hesitant.

"Honestly, from what I knew about Joe's story, I did not think this could make a theatrical movie," Atkins says. "I love Joe; he has great character. He's so gentle and a meek person, but that doesn't make a movie."

That changed after the producer, who started his company in 2009, asked Bradford to lunch.

"At that time [Bradford] starts crying over a Five Guys burger and starts to tell me all of the aspects of his life," Atkins explains. "I said, 'Well, maybe Jesus knows a little bit more about this than I do.'"

Act IV: The Climax

This month Atkins' movie, *Unconditional*, based on Papa Joe's life, hits theaters nationwide—yet another thing Bradford never imagined possible. The film stars Lynn Collins (*John Carter*, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*) and Michael Ealy (*Think Like a Man*, *Seven Pounds*) and opens Sept. 21.

Yet for Atkins, the making of *Unconditional* turned out to be as melodramatic as Bradford's own life.

The producer was hoping to find a true story that could compellingly share the love of Christ, and Bradford's story turned out to be exactly what he was looking for.

Six weeks before filming began, however, a set that had taken 12 weeks to construct was destroyed by a tornado. The crew scrambled and remarkably was able to rebuild it in only six weeks.

Then, only a week out from the first day of shooting, another set's basement flooded. Once again, the crew pulled off a miracle by rebuilding it in one week.

Having overcome these hurdles, Atkins didn't know whether to laugh or cry when the drama continued.

Just one week into filming, the entire 70-member technical crew went on strike. In just three days he was able to replace those workers.

"There's no question that God's hand has been on the project and that God has led us," Atkins says. "When we were looking for a story to tell, we wanted a story that was based on true events or inspired by true events. We didn't want to have to become fictitious about the love of God or who God is. We felt like a true story would be more powerful."

Bradford says it's humbling for his testimony to be told on the movie screen. And though his life is akin to a blockbuster movie, he insists he is no hero.

"I don't consider myself a hero," he says. "But there are so many against-all-odds experiences that I believe I've learned the secret weapon of a hero. And to me, from Papa Joe's perspective, it's the love of Christ in our hearts."

"I believe that word can be defined in the word *unconditional*. This movie is a testament to what I've learned throughout all of my experiences, and that's love. That's the weapon that can defeat anything. That's my prayer for these children."

Felicia Abraham is associate editor of *Charisma*. Though she

doesn't usually cry during movies, she could've gone through a box of Kleenex while watching Unconditional.

To see how Elijah's Heart is changing thousands of lives click [here](#).