

Peter Bentley

Press Service International Columnist

February 2021

Riding the Waves with Faith

Many readers would be familiar with Bethany Hamilton, the young Hawaiian surfer who lost her left arm in a shark attack in 2003 when she only thirteen. Her story has been told in a short film, *Heart of a Soul Surfer* (2007), and two major films.

Soul Surfer

The first being the aptly entitled: *Soul Surfer* (2011) based on the 2004 autobiography: *Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board*

The film has an impressive cast, starring AnnaSophia Robb as Bethany, Academy Award winner Helen Hunt as Cheri Hamilton (mother) and Dennis Quaid as Tom Hamilton (father). Carrie Underwood features in her first film role as the youth minister/pastor Sarah Hill (a way to introduce the 'going on mission' context and to ensure she does some singing too). Kevin Sorbo, now a well-established actor in faith films (it has been a while since Hercules), plays Holt, the father of Bethany's close friend Alana Blanchard.

As well as an encouraging story, this is a helpful film for those wanting to understand the dynamics and ethos of the beach surfing culture. Even though I grew up near one of the world's most renowned beaches (Crescent Head, NSW) I viewed the beach as more of an intellectual concept than the base for a whole lifestyle, so it helped me to realise the power of the water and the waves.

The movie had mixed reviews from critics, and it has many reviews because of the Hollywood actors. Some critics simply found it too boring and the faith elements a bit twee. I think critics failed to realise this was a fairly simple story and the faith of the family, a normal American experience. The shark attack was not the menacing hunting of 'jaws', but a quick attack; one minute happily in the water and the next, nearly bleeding to death as friends try to get you ashore. The story is then about how a young girl coped with the change through her faith and the support of her family, friends, and church.

A strength is in the filming itself, with a fast-paced editing style for the action scenes that younger people will particularly appreciate. There are some spectacular surfing and water scenes and wonderful depictions of the natural beauty of Hawaii (and Tahiti). Some surfing scenes will prompt memories for people familiar with classic surfing films of the 1970s and 1980s.

While there at times, limitations with the dialogue and some acting, taken as a whole, it is a warm Christian Hollywood-type film that commends itself to a wide audience.

As I have said, in many ways, this is a simple story, but a good story that highlights the importance of family support and love and surely in this time of broken relationships and fractured families, a much more important focus than whether it was riveting enough to earn any Academy Award nominations.

Unstoppable (2018)

This is an official documentary, usually released now as *Bethany Hamilton: Unstoppable*. (Available on Premieres at MoviesChangePeople). This more extensive documentary provides the story of her life, from early days with junior surfing, and the move to professional surfing, her marriage, and children and ultimately how she coped with all the changes and challenges from such a public media profile.

I found this documentary fascinating in terms of American culture as it vividly illustrated the context of Christian celebrity. While I was aware of the Bethany Hamilton story, I had no idea that Bethany Hamilton was such a significant celebrity style figure, though I was aware of the Christian surfing sub-culture in Australia that developed through ministries such as Christian Surfers. Her media profile has helped to raise Christian surfing to a significant platform in the USA. Bethany now has a very prominent role as a Christian speaker and role model, particularly for young Christian women. Bethany is quite familiar with Australian surfing having competed in several international events.

So many opportunities have come about because of that one terrible event in her life. An important part of the documentary considers the way Bethany's faith has helped her understand this, and now with the support of her husband, use her talents to reach out and support people who have had similar traumatic events, and pointing them to the hope one can have in Jesus Christ.

It is a wonderful testimony and encouraged me to pray for Christians who are in the media spotlight like Bethany. In this celebrity age and culture, it can be a trap to believe all the publicity about oneself. May God give us all humility to continue to walk closely with our God.

A concluding quote from Bethany:

Surfing isn't the most important thing in life. Love is. I've had the chance to embrace more people with one arm than I ever could with two.