

Filmmaker Sean McNamara Advocates for Family-Friendly Entertainment in Hollywood

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The director behind some of Hollywood’s most beloved family films says he wants to help “bring back” movies that everyone can watch together, inspiring both parents and kids alike. Filmmaker Sean McNamara is the director behind such films as *Soul Surfer* (2011), *Hoovey* (2015), *The Miracle Season* (2018), and *On a Wing and a Prayer* (2023). His latest project, the Great American Pure Flix series *Shadrach*, follows the story of a family whose lives are changed when they encounter a mysterious horse.

“I like something that the whole family can watch together,” McNamara told Crosswalk Headlines. “And the things that I grew up on, like the *Waltons* or *Brady Bunch* — those are the sorts of things that I want to bring back to the new generation.”

Shadrach, he said, still has “some edge to it” but is “done in a way that the whole family” can watch. If “you are faith-adjacent or faith-based, you will enjoy it even more,” he added.

McNamara has directed more than 70 projects but is perhaps best known for *Soul Surfer*, which recounted the true story of surfer Bethany Hamilton, who lost her arm in a shark attack. It starred Anna Sophia Robb, Dennis Quaid, Helen Hunt, and Carrie Underwood.

“If I had lost my arm to a shark attack, I think I would never get back in the ocean,” McNamara said. “She goes, ‘Not only am I gonna get back in the ocean — I’m going to compete at the highest level’ — and she does it. So I like making stories that show people going up against incredible odds, fighting back, and being able to move on with that.”

“[In *Shadrach*,] we have a family that gets kicked out of downtown Atlanta because of bankruptcy — and the brother did some nefarious business. They ended up living with grandma and grandpa on a farm with a stable — and how boring could that be for young kids? And then they find the beauty of that — the beauty in animals. And so when you can tell stories about characters that can change and can adapt — those are the ones that I like to do. Because I think all of our lives, we have to change and adapt all the time. ...I think it will draw the family closer together when they watch it.”

McNamara fell in love with cinematography at age 12 when his father bought him a camera. He went to Catholic school and then studied film and television at Loyola Marymount University.

He said his big break came when a friend’s father gave him a chance.

“My friend’s dad directed the Academy Awards. I had no connections into the business,” McNamara said. “And I said, ‘Can I please work for your dad?’ And so I got this meeting with him finally after like a year of begging. And he said, ‘So kid, what do you do?’ And at that time, I was in rock bands. I said, ‘Well, I can play guitar, and I could plug in microphones.’”

He helped with audio at Ronald Reagan’s inauguration in 1981. (He is the director of the new theatrical film Reagan, which releases Aug. 30.)

“I just worked my way up into doing movies, Totally Hidden Video, Candid Camera, until I could start making a living making movies. ... I just liked doing family programming, and it just kept going.”

Michael Foust has covered the intersection of faith and news for 20 years. His stories have appeared in Baptist Press, Christianity Today, The Christian Post, the Leaf-Chronicle, the Toronto Star and the Knoxville News-Sentinel.