

THE FAVORITE

FROM TRAGEDY TO MOVIE

by JEFF FRIEND

AS HE LISTENED to his son Luke's employer on the phone calling from California, Daniel Bernard was already getting an unsettling feeling.

"Hey, I don't mean to pry into somebody's personal business," the boss said. "But Luke is such a good employee, and he hasn't shown up or called for three days."

"What?" replied Daniel. "That's not like Luke at all. Something's wrong."

That quick conversation ignited an intense search by the Bernard family to find 25-year-old Luke. They reached out through social media, checked with emergency rooms and law-enforcement offices, and spoke with Luke's fellow employees. Eventually, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office confirmed Luke had been in a single-car accident and was in a hospital that the Bernards had already called.

Daniel was at Houston's Hobby Airport when his wife, Kathy, called with the news.

"They found him," she said. "I talked to the doctor, and it's bad."

Daniel hurriedly changed his plans and flew to Los Angeles, and Kathy arrived a day later.

Luke's head was greatly enlarged from the traumatic brain injury he sustained, and numerous tubes and machines administered vital aid to his bruised and battered body. A 4"-by-5" portion of his skull had been removed to allow doctors access to his brain to remove two life-threatening blood clots and allow the brain to swell. The Bernards also learned

Luke had two broken vertebrae in his neck and back. The doctor's prognosis gave little hope of survival.

The accident happened in the early morning hours of March 9, 2013, and Luke had been alone in the hospital for three days before his parents located him. The Bernards activated a prayer network of thousands of believers praying for Luke's total healing.

Following a miraculously fast recovery and rehabilitation period, Luke returned home to his family in Florida.



Luke Bernard during and after his recovery

Because of the brain trauma, Luke suffered from insomnia. But one night about six months after the accident, he fell into a deep sleep and had a dream. When he awoke, he told his family about the dream and that he thought he was supposed to start writing a script.

The result was the script for a movie titled *The Favorite* (www.thefavoritemovie.com), but Daniel pointed out an incredible fact: Luke had needed to relearn almost every basic function of life, including writing, speaking, and even dressing.

"Luke wrote this script six months after the accident happened," he said. "But two months after the accident he was just trying to write his name for the first time. He's never written a script before in his life, and six months after a near-death experience and brain trauma, he writes this movie script."

The Favorite, directed by Curtis Graham, is a fictionalized account of Luke's physical and spiritual transformation. Although raised in a Christian home, Luke admits at the time of his accident, he had drifted from his upbringing.

Luke explained, "I had this fight within to strive to be this perfect Christian, and then I would party with friends so they would like me. I was living as a party animal when the accident happened."

The movie focuses on two brothers, Luke and Benjamin, and the theme is favoritism, whether real or perceived. Luke represents the physical struggles that resulted from the accident, while Benjamin embodies the spiritual battles.

Benjamin perceives that Luke has been his parents' favorite son. As a result, he immerses himself in the sport of Mixed Martial Arts as an outlet for his anger and a means to try to become the favorite. Benjamin eventually realizes that his perceptions about his father, and about God, are wrong, and he reconciles with both.

Besides Luke Bernard, *The Favorite* also features John Schneider (*Dukes of Hazzard, Smallville*), three-time World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) champion Jeff Hardy, current Ultimate Fighting

Championship (UFC) Welterweight World Champion Tyron Woodley, Mollee Gray, Matthew Fahey, and Amye Gousset.

The Bernards' home church, Gulf Coast Church of God in Largo, Florida, served as the host site for the production office. The movie's Mixed Martial Arts action, an internal church scene, and a few smaller scenes were filmed on the church's property. Many church members and friends were used as extras throughout the filming, and they also supplied drivers, meals, housing, and a wide variety of behind-the-scenes support. Many other Tampa Bay area churches and businesses also helped out, and Pastor Randy Morris praised the efforts.

"For me, it was the fruition of over three decades of being in the community and connecting with pastors and other churches," explained Pastor Morris. "It's what we have embodied and tried to cast as a vision for our church that we work together with the body of Christ to reach the community. It showed incredible cooperation of the churches all across the Bay area."

Daniel, the movie's producer, echoes Pastor Morris' belief that *The Favorite's* mission is to be much more than just entertainment.

"This is a movie with a mission," said Daniel. "Luke's name means 'light bearer,' so our mission statement is to bear the light of the Gospel through *The Favorite* in as many cities in America as possible and beyond. We are seeking to bring pastors together in their cities to really utilize this film to impact their community."

The Bernards have produced a 21-day prayer guide, two Gospel tracts, and a six-week study guide on favoritism to help churches reach their communities through the movie.

Pastor Morris foresees *The Favorite* making a significant impact in viewers' lives.

"My prayer is that it reaches the Millennial Generation," he said. "I think it has the possibility of doing that, especially with the variety of themes that are



interwoven into the story lines and just the gripping miracle that takes place. So the ultimate goal is that it will truly reach the unchurched culture, and I believe it's going to happen."

The Favorite has completed filming and is currently in post-production. Its anticipated release is late-2017 or early-2018.

"It's a story about family dynamics and how people will have different perspectives and oftentimes those perceptions aren't right," summarized Luke. "It's about love, loss, forgiveness, healed relationships, and ultimately that we're all God's favorite." ☩

Jeff Friend is a freelance writer who is a member of the Gulf Coast Church of God in Largo, Florida.

TOP: Luke Bernard (left) and John Schneider in a scene during filming of *The Favorite*

BOTTOM: Pastor Randy Morris praying a blessing over the cast and crew on the last day of filming