

Film: 'This is much bigger than religious conviction'

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Doss made the trip from his home in Ilwaco, Washington, to the theaters of Tinseltown for an advance screening of "Hacksaw Ridge," the film based on the life of his father, a devout Seventh-day Adventist who was awarded the Medal of Honor in the wake of World War II without ever picking up a weapon.

As if watching his mother and father's life play out on the big screen wasn't crazy enough, Doss also spoke candidly with actors Andrew Garfield, who played his father, Teresa Palmer, who played his mother, and many other stars of the already acclaimed film set to be released nationwide in theaters Friday, but can be seen tonight at 7 at the Astoria Gateway Cinema.

It would be easy to imagine Doss — who served as a medic like his father, and spent much of his life as a firefighter and who now relishes his part-time job cleaning the Ilwaco Post Office — overwhelmed and out of place among Hollywood's elite. But pictures from his trip show the near 70-year-old engaged and at ease with the millionaire movie moguls. He even talked privately with Gibson about the filmmaker's fall from grace almost a decade ago after a drunken-driving arrest and other missteps.

"It was hard to avoid," Doss explained candidly. Unsurprisingly, Doss did exactly what he said he would do months before, when asked what he would say to Gibson if he ever met him in person.

"I would tell him that I admire what he has managed to come back from," Doss said. "I relate to people that aren't perfect. I get that. Most of us have to take detours and some of us don't ever come back. He might not be all the way there, but he's certainly going in the right direction."

'Incredible capacity for love'

As the opening to "Hacksaw Ridge" drew nearer, Doss, who was never consulted about the film, started getting calls from journalists, museum directors, and finally an employee from Lionsgate that had just been

hired to promote the film. She had heard of Doss, and was a little surprised no one had reached out to him before.

Soon after the Chinook Observer's September story about Doss, the promoter arranged to fly an advance copy of the film to Astoria, where Doss and some of his closest friends viewed a private screening.

Doss and his girlfriend settled into seats in a near-empty theater. His firefighter "brothers," including Ilwaco Fire Chief Tom Williams and Ilwaco city councilman and firefighter Gary Forner, and Doss' friends surrounded them, at a distance.

Doss' family's life played out on screen — there was his grandfather, his father, his mother. How surreal it must be for him. He seemed to lean toward the screen with a scrutinizing intensity, pausing only now and then to place a kernel of popcorn into his mouth or take a sip of soda.

There was his father, being beaten. There was his father, being scorned. Principle and perseverance drove the man, that much was clear, but Doss was not depicted as some kind of bulletproof GI Joe, but rather as a man who personally suffered gravely as he put the lives of his "brothers" ahead of his own.

Tears did not stream down Doss' cheeks, but rather his misty eyes glowed as if staring at an apparition.

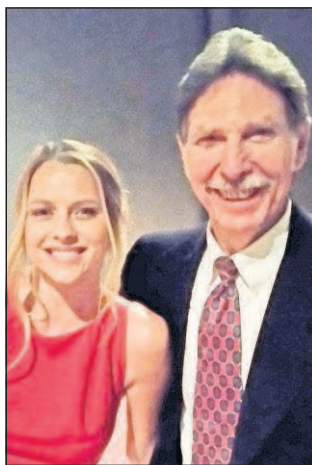
"I know I saw a completely different movie than what everyone else saw," Doss reflected later. "What I saw was a love story. I saw a man that loved his wife, loved his country, loved his principles, loved his church, loved his God — a man that had an incredible capacity for love in the midst of all that chaos."

Mr. Doss goes to Hollywood

It turns out no one from Lionsgate had contacted Doss earlier because they had been told he didn't want anything to do with the film.

"As soon as they found out that wasn't true, everything really lit up like a Christmas tree," Doss said.

He admits he may have said



Submitted Photo
Desmond Doss Jr. sits with Australian actress Teresa Palmer, who plays his mother Dorothy Schutte Doss in "Hacksaw Ridge," which opens in Astoria at the Gateway Cinema tonight.

a few critical things on Facebook and that he had grown distant from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but Doss had seen his father's story butchered before. Though he had no control over how it would be told, he had always been protective. Doss, perhaps more than anyone, knew his father's reticence about turning earnest principles into entertainment.

"I watched him turn down an endless procession of people that wanted to popularize his story, and he said 'No' to each and every one of them," he said.

But something told Doss this would be different. His father's story needed an accomplished filmmaker. Warts and all, Mel Gibson seemed to fit the bill.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to get my father's story in front of the public in a secular venue," Doss said. "This is so much bigger than a religious conviction."

After the screening in Astoria, Doss was then invited to Los Angeles for a glitzy premiere. Gibson himself and all the actors from the film would also attend. It was the chance of a lifetime. Doss dusted off an old suit coat and donned a plane for Hollywood.

After the premiere, Gibson, who Doss calls "Mel," asked him to say a few words. "This is the right movie at the right time," Doss said. "It just

needs to get into the consciousness, that you can love, no matter what's going on."

The more time he spent with the actors, traveling with them to New Orleans for another premiere, the more they loosened up. He learned Garfield had spent eight hours filming one short scene that he just had to get right. "Mel let him keep going and going."

'Closer to my father'

Doss called the performances by Garfield and Palmer "eerie." Garfield had captured his father's mannerisms, his way of speaking, and his quiet confidence.

Doss told Garfield as much. "He got tears in his eyes when I told him he did a great job," Doss said. "He said if I thought it, it must have made it so."

And Palmer, he said, was smart, like his mother.

"I felt like I was actually seeing my mom there at times, like when she was pissed off at him for signing up, and she said, 'I love you, I just don't like you right now.' She had that duality, there was the emotional side and the intellectual side," Doss said.

When the crush of the crowds in LA got to be a bit much, Doss found a place to sneak away from the hustle. He saw one of the actors from the film doing the same. But he looked different than he did in the movie.

"Which one are you?" Doss asked the man. "Luke," he said.

"Oh, are you the guy that beat the shit out of my dad?" Doss retorted. The actor, Luke Bracey, said "Yeah."

Doss, ever personable and unpretentious, shot back, "I hope you know I'm not like him. I'll take you out back!"

The two shared a good laugh.

But hobnobbing with the Hollywood types didn't seem to be going to Doss' head. Asked if he was planning to keep his job at the post office, he said he was.

"Hey, I still gotta eat," Doss said with a laugh, calling the tiny post office his "general store."

This chapter in Doss' life is still unfolding, and he's taking it in one day at a time.

"It's the ultimate to see this

happening," Doss said. "This has brought me so much closer to my father."

Save one life and you've saved the world

Doss' own life has been something of a miracle, and like his father's, filled with hard-won lessons. The movie depicts the time before and during the war, before Doss Jr. came along. However, for those who fight and those who know them, "The war is never really over," Doss Jr. said. The hurt and heroism live on, passed from father to son, and so too the lessons.

Doss said he could never be like his father. Truly, who could? See this movie and you will see a factual story of a man who literally stayed with the wounded, exposed and unarmed, well after all others had retreated.

While Doss will never win a Medal of Honor for his lifetime of work as a firefighter, for decades he picked the wounded up off the streets, dragged them from burning buildings, and tended to them in mangled cars. He has no doubt saved dozens of lives with the tools of his father — a tourniquet, an IV drip, a calm presence. How many has he saved?

Inspired by his father, by age 16 Doss Jr. was teaching instructors to teach first aid. But when he enlisted as a conscientious objector he didn't face the same abuse his father did. "All the things my dad fought for — it was just run-of-the-mill."

After the Army, Doss found his medical training had prepared him to save lives in a civilian role as a firefighter. His expertise in first aid training led him to perform critical work with a national commission dedicated to revamping emergency response services. Before those days, he remembered, "if you had a medical emergency, the last thing you wanted was a bunch of firemen showing up."

Today, many firefighters are also highly trained medical responders because of the work Doss did.

"I got to be involved in the creation of what we now call a paramedic," he said in his typically understated way. "It was kind of interesting."

Overcoming the self

Being a firefighter has provided Doss with insight into the struggles of others, and his own.

"In my line of work, I see the underbelly," Doss said. "People don't ever call you because they're having a good day. Drugs. Suicide. Domestic problems. Ill health. They don't have much control over their destiny. Actually they do, but no one's ever said — 'You can do what you want to do.' I don't know where I came by the notion that I could do whatever I set my mind to, but that came to me somewhere in life."

But it turned out confidence wasn't always easy to come by for this son of a war hero. He looked for strength in various religions, found his father's story at turns inspiring and intimidating, but ultimately credits his turnaround to Joe Sabah, a man he calls his "mentor."

Sabah sent Doss to the Dale Carnegie Institute. He remembers being called to get up "in front of everybody," to talk about something he had earned the right to talk about. Doss was terrified, of not being good enough, of other people, of what they might think of him.

"The only thing I remember for sure," Doss recalled, "was the opening line, which was, 'I've been alone all of my life.'"

Doss had lost his faith in religion, his marriage had broken up and he was spending every night by himself, thinking, dwelling, sometimes drinking too much, unable to reach out. He may have recalled to the others some or all of that. All he clearly remembers was when his two minutes were up.

"Everybody was there in support of everybody else, so when you got done talking there would be applause, I don't care how bad you were," Doss said.

But when Doss finished, there was no applause, just dead silence.

"And I thought, 'Well, I really blew that.' I've still got my head bowed, then I finally kind of looked up and all these people were crying, and that was the day I joined the human race," Doss said. "These people I had been totally petrified of are human beings. They're like me."

Governor: College ready to assist after tsunami

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"The side benefit is that we can put Oregonians to work as well," Brown said. "It's a win-win."

Idea of preparedness

Brown's visit came a day after Andrew Phelps, head of the state's Office of Emergency Management, said that the state had earned a grade of C after the four-day Cascadia Rising earthquake preparedness drill in June. Brown was joined on her county tour by Phelps and Tiffany Brown, the county's emergency planner.

Gov. Brown said she assumed a higher percentage of people on the Oregon Coast are prepared for a disaster.

"It's a relatively new science for us," Tiffany Brown

said. "I think we talk about preparedness, but we talk among my staff a lot about changing the cultural mindset. It really is a much bigger task at hand than passing out brochures to people."

Tiffany Brown said global events caught on video have given people much greater awareness of what they are in store for in a disaster "because we don't really know. We don't have historical records like they do in Japan that help us better understand what to expect."

Phelps said the issue of preparedness will not be solved by the public or private sectors alone, but by everyone partnering.

A safe place

Christopher Breitmeyer,

the college president, said the college is seen as a place to gather in a disaster, which people did during the Great Coastal Gale in 2007.

Greg Dorcheus, head of the college's maintenance department and manager on the Patriot Hall project, said much of the college's efforts the last 20 years have been focused on modernizing the campus through the Jerome Campus Redevelopment Project. Over the last 10 years of the project, the college has replaced Fertig Hall with the new Columbia Hall at the center of campus, seismically retrofitted Towler Hall and is now modernizing Patriot Hall.

"Three of our buildings will be essentially new," he said. "One was substantially

upgraded and meets current seismic codes. We only have two left on this campus that really need that full extent" of seismic upgrades. "We've really come a long way in the last 20 years."

In the event of a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake, Breitmeyer said, the college can take well over 1,000 people.

Dorcheus recounted a tsunami warning at 4 a.m. several years ago, immediately after which the college opened and started taking in people.

"We put folks in Columbia Hall, primarily," he said. "And we took places and made them for the children, we took spaces for everybody else. We were able to hand down information to them, and it worked out really well."



Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

Gov. Kate Brown, center, chats with Clatsop Community College head of maintenance Greg Dorcheus, right, and Clatsop Community College President Christopher Breitmeyer while touring the construction of Patriot Hall.

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