

THE ARTS

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LONGVIEW NATIVE STARS IN FAITH-BASED 'WE ARE STRONGER'



SUBMITTED PHOTO/COAST WEEKEND

The theater was packed for the premiere of 'Stronger,' starring Angela Sweet.

Angela Sweet discusses feature film about PTSD and the military

By **MARILYN GILBAUGH
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FOR COAST WEEKEND

As the nation pauses on Memorial Day to honor military personnel who died in service, the somber holiday presents an opportunity to reflect on hardships disproportionately affecting members of the armed forces.

Angela Myers Sweet — the daughter of Kathy Williams, of Ocean Park, Washington — is bringing attention to one such issue, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), through her work in “We Are Stronger,” a faith-based feature film set for an initial five-city distribution but can be viewed in Oregon and Washington later this year.

Produced by Reflective Life Ministries in partnership with the Mighty Oaks Foundation and other organizations, the movie follows Master Sgt. Victor Raphael,

who is nearing the end of his military career when he is injured by an explosion in Afghanistan, according to the official website.

At home in Texas, Victor suffers the pain of physical rehabilitation, the stress of stabilizing a rocky marriage, and the tension of reentering the civilian world. Though he copes, at first, with his post-traumatic stress through isolation, he eventually finds hope and healing through spiritual faith and a community of people who have also survived trauma.

Sweet, 39, who plays Victor’s wife Michelle Raphael, has been acting for decades. At age 11, she played Lucy in a stage adaptation of “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” in Longview, Washington, her hometown.

She continued honing her skills through acting classes in Vancouver, Washington, and then in California, where she worked as a model and film extra.

In 2012, she moved with her husband, Shawn, from North Carolina to Texas, and eventually got involved in “We Are Stronger,” which started filming about two years ago.

Production notes

The entire production, a nonprofit project, has been supported by the devotion of its volunteer actors and producers, Sweet said.

The team had assistance from some unique sources. Various entities, including the Spirit of Texas Bank, sponsored the movie. The mayor of Huntsville, Texas, volunteered their community Fourth of July parade as the backdrop for the movie’s final scene. And a woman in Montgomery, Texas, allowed the filmmakers to use her home as a set.

In the end, the cost of production was about \$175,000, well below the estimated \$250,000 budget, Sweet said.

The producers changed



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Actress Angela Sweet (center, seated in vehicle) recently made her big-screen debut in ‘Stronger,’ a feature film depicting the struggle of a soldier and his family dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder.



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Actress Angela Sweet, third from left, poses for a photo with members of her family at the premiere of the film ‘Stronger,’ co-starring Sweet.

the title from “Stronger” to “We Are Stronger” to distinguish the film from the David Gordon Green’s “Stronger,” a film about a Boston Marathon bombing victim that will be released in September.

The switch worked out well. “That’s our theme anyway,” Sweet said, adding “We Are Stronger Together” was always the film’s tagline.

“We Are Stronger” is intended to “raise awareness and provide empowerment,” Sweet said. Profits from the film will go to Stronger Alliance organizations that serve veterans, first responders, burn victims and other people suffering from PTSD.

Suffering in silence

Events experienced by military personnel that can

lead to post-traumatic stress disorder include combat, exposure to “horrible and life-threatening experiences” and military sexual trauma, which can happen to individuals of any gender and in times of peace, training or war, according to the National Center for PTSD.

Williams and Sweet are passionate about helping veterans receive the physical and mental care they require upon returning to civilian life. Williams suggested the establishment of a program they could automatically enter upon leaving the military to start mentally deconstructing the trauma they have experienced.

Sweet has given several presentations through various organizations. PTSD, she said, is often described as a silent volcano that can manifest through violent behavior, isolation, difficulty sleeping and other symptoms.

Rather than letting people suffer in silence, it is important to help them identify their symptoms early and connect them with resources “before that volcano explodes,” she said.

Sweet believes that changing the label would benefit people on the road to recovery.

“There’s a little bit of stigma happening with post-traumatic stress disorder,” she said. “When you take a leader and slap a label of ‘disorder’ on them, it can be equally traumatizing.”

Other descriptors, such as post-traumatic stress or post-traumatic injury, are beginning to surface in discussions about optimal treatments, Sweet said.

For more information about “We Are Stronger,” visit StrongerMovie.com.