

New movie depicts story of pro baseball player Rickey Hill

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NASHVILLE (BP) —*The Hill* tells the inspirational true story of professional baseball player Rickey Hill, the son of a Southern Baptist pastor.

Hill overcame a degenerative spinal disease, confining him to leg braces as a child. The movie also depicts the healing of his relationship with his father, portrayed by Dennis Quaid, who originally did not want him to play baseball.

Hill said he hopes his story of perseverance will inspire audiences.

“When you say the words ‘never quit,’ those are just words, but doing it is a different story. I never ever gave up,” Hill said.

“God gave me the power and the strength to hit a baseball, and I never did understand why he took it away from me. But then I got my answer when this movie came about. This was my answer.”

Hill is portrayed in the film, which released Aug. 25, by Colin Ford. The movie also stars country music singer-songwriter Randy Houser, as well as Golden Globe nominee Bonnie Bedelia.

The movie is directed by Jeff Celentano and written by screenwriter Angelo Pizzo, who wrote the classic sports films *Hoosiers* and *Rudy*.

Celentano said when he first saw the script for the movie, he knew it was something he had to make.

“I read it and I got very emotional about seven times throughout,” Celentano said. “Something happened to me that night. It just went into my

soul and stayed there. I fell in love with it.

“To me the movie has such a well-rounded family feeling about it. The greatest sports movies are the ones that aren’t about sports. I’m overwhelmed at how it all came together in the end.”

Overcoming challenges—on-screen and off-screen

Much like Hill’s real-life story, producing the movie came with its own set of challenges.

Hill had been trying to get a movie made about his story, but plans seemed to always fall apart.

One day, Celentano’s brother was in the lobby of a hotel, where he overheard Hill talking on the phone about his struggles getting the film made. He struck up a conversation and told Hill his brother was a film director and likely would be interested in the story.

Celentano met Hill the next day and the two bonded instantly. They labored 15 years for the movie to finally hit the screen.

The portion of Hill’s story which captivated Celentano, and was incredibly important to Hill, was the relationship he had with his father.

Growing up as a pastor’s son

James Hill was pastor of several Southern Baptist churches throughout his ministry, including Twin Oaks Baptist Church in Keller, which is depicted in the movie. James died at age 50 from pancreatic cancer.

Hill says his father loved him deeply, but the two were divided about his

dream of playing baseball. His father wanted him to follow in his footsteps to become a preacher, but Hill insisted he could both play baseball and focus on ministry.

“As a kid I would go outside and mimic my dad preaching,” Hill said.

“I would go outside and grab a bench and just start preaching. My Dad would be looking through the blinds, and he’s watching me out there beating on my little pulpit that I had made. It just tickled him to death, because I was following somewhat his footsteps.

“My Dad grew to love me so much. We were very close. Dennis portrayed that well in the movie. We had a relationship that was just remarkable, except that baseball to him was not included.

“He just thought I was going to become a preacher no matter, and then my (baseball) talent started to really shine. I continued on with baseball, and each year I got better and better.”

Focusing on family relationship

Celentano wanted to portray that the elder Hill truly loved his son, and only discouraged him from playing baseball out of protection. This familial journey of growth is something he believes audiences will relate to.

“That relationship with his father that Rickey had was so interesting to me,” Celentano said.

“He wanted him to be a preacher. He knew that would be a better thing and safer for him. Dennis got it, and we talked about it for hours.

“He said: ‘This guy loved his son. He wasn’t holding him back from baseball because he was selfish. He was holding him back from baseball because he was worried about his health and thinking he was going to be crippled the

rest of his life if he continued this.'

"They (Rickey and his father) learn something together and become better for it, which is what the inspiration is."

Hill is thrilled the movie depicts not only his baseball journey, but also the bond he had with his father.

"My Dad had the most tender heart of anybody, and he would be in tears throughout this whole movie," Hill said. "I wouldn't blame him, either."