



A scene from Rich's latest film, "The Secrets of Jonathan Sperry."
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An Exclusive Interview with Rich Christiano

Christian Film Writer, Director, and Producer Rich Christiano shares his passion, ministry, and the story behind his latest film.

Since the time I first came across “The Secrets of Jonathan Sperry”, the new film by Christian film maker Rich Christiano, I’ve been amazed at how God has been working through this touching movie and how many lives it has already touched, let alone transformed.

In the December issue of LIVING Christian magazine I reviewed this limited release film and quickly decided the people of Macon County needed to have the opportunity to see it for themselves. I knew the movie could be a tremendous blessing to many, but I had no idea how receptive so many people, on so many levels, would be to lending their support. It has been an absolute delight to work with our community church leaders, pastors, business people, and Rich Christiano himself.

The moment I heard and saw Gavin MacLeod and Rich Christiano’s promotional clip for the film, I knew there was something special here. I could tell from their tone and demeanor, these were men who truly loved the Lord and wanted to share their faith in God with as many people as possible using their God given talents.

The other day I had the privilege of visiting with Rich personally, hoping he would “open up a bit” during the interview. He more than exceeded my expectations.

LCM: Rich, I know our readers are anxious to hear more about “The Secrets of Jonathan Sperry” but first I’d like to hear about what brought you to where you are today in the Christian film industry and your walk with Christ.

Rich: I was raised in upstate New York, Roman Catholic. Was an altar boy for ten years, went to a Catholic grammar school, went to a Catholic college, but I did not have a personal relationship with Jesus. My brother and I wrote a script and when we were twenty years old we got in our car in Waterloo, New York and we drove cross-country to Hollywood. We gave our script to Max Baer, Jr. Most people remember him as Jethro on “The Beverly Hillbillies” and he wanted to buy the script! We negotiated one year with him, not over money, but over content. Even though we weren’t Christians this was a wholesome high school story and he wanted to put a lot of junk in it and we never signed a deal. He had an assistant who liked the script and

offered us twice the money. We signed an option deal with him but he reneged on the first payment and we got our script back.

LCM: Being young and new to Hollywood, that says a lot about your integrity.

Rich: I became a born-again believer on May 3, 1980 which is another long story. The first non-Catholic church I ever walked into was John MacArthur’s church; a fine Bible teacher. It changed my life. Now a lot of people think when you become a Christian you’ve got to go to Africa or something. But my brother and I wanted to make movies and God said, “Make them for Me.” God got us out of California and we went to Jonesboro, Arkansas in 1981 to go back to school. I lived there for twenty one years.

My brother eventually got a job down in San Antonio and he met a guy who said, “You guys should make Christian films.” We weren’t sure what they were! So we watched a couple. At that time you made a movie on 16mm for the church then rented it out. We made our first Christian film in 1985. The first three movies we made, my brother directed. But I wanted to direct, too so we split our company in two. Now between us we’ve made twelve films.



Rich Christiano



Robert Guillaume as Mr. Barnes

I've done six and my brother has done six: all Christ centered movies, all with messages from the Lord. That's always been our motive, to first put forth the Truth because the Truth will set people free.

LCM: Amen. That is really evident in this film.

Rich: Finally in 2002 I made my first feature film. I did a film called "Time Changer." In 2006 I did a film called "Unidentified" and in 2009 I did "The Secrets of Jonathan Sperry."

LCM: What was the inspiration for "The Secrets of Jonathan Sperry?"

Rich: Growing up I didn't have a Jonathan Sperry in my life. I had a good relationship with my parents, but I didn't have a Jonathan Sperry. I'm not sure how I got this idea. I wanted to make a movie about an older man, just a normal person, and show with his wisdom how we can impact kids. Basically "The Secrets of Jonathan Sperry" could have been called "The Wisdom of Jonathan Sperry." It started out as an idea about this seventy-five year old man who starts talking to these three twelve year old boys to motivate them to read the Bible and follow the Lord.

LCM: Tell me more about the setting, the location, and the time period of Jonathan Sperry.

Rich: I wanted to set it in a small town. I grew up in a small town in upper New York and that's where we filmed it. I wanted the double-decker houses, I wanted the sidewalks, the simple lifestyle. There are some elements in the film from my childhood. For example my two best friends growing up were Albert and Mark and so I used their names.

LCM: How does this film differ in approach from your other two feature films?

Rich: I wanted to make a film that would touch hearts. I've done three feature films, "Time Changer", "Unidentified", and "Sperry." The other two have been more academic or intellectual types. This movie was more for the heart. The response has been very encouraging and from all ages not just kids: the elderly, parents, women; very encouraging.

LCM: We've recently seen a few Christian films do very well at the box office, such as "The Chronicles of Narnia", "The Passion of the Christ", and "Fireproof." Do you see a growing interest in the Christian film industry?

Rich: Yes. I see the industry growing and my main concern is that we keep the message of Christ in there because that's what makes it Christian. Leave Christ out and you might have a family film, a wholesome film, an inspirational film, but you don't have a Christian film. I want to put Christ in our films and I think that's very key.

LCM: It must be tough competing with other Hollywood filmmakers.

Rich: Certainly Hollywood smells money. The church audience is a huge audience. One third of this country goes to church. That's a big audience. If we get them all to see "Jonathan Sperry", we'll be the "Titanic" at the box office. If "Fireproof" had bombed, it would be harder to get Christian films into theaters.

LCM: How can we, as a body of believers, get more Christian films into the theaters?

Rich: We need to continue putting forth Christ-honoring movies that reach people. Everybody is trying to reach people. Well, if you're going to reach anybody you have to first please the Lord. That's rule number one in filmmaking for me. I want people to see our films, but first I want to first make sure I please the One who I made it for.

LCM: That must sometimes be difficult to remember when you're in the middle of shooting a film.

Rich: When I became a Christian, when I made my first feature film, I felt like the Lord said to me, "Rich, I don't care if ten people see it. You make it for Me."

LCM: My undergraduate degree is in acting and I know the process of building a character is hard work and includes a lot of research and reliving past experiences. Is the character Jonathan Sperry based on any particular individual or experience you've had?

Rich: We wrote the character after Gavin MacLeod. When I was shooting "Time Changer" Gavin and I went out to eat and I told Gavin I had an idea for another film but I hadn't written anything for it yet. I explained it to him and he said it sounded wonderful. Then I said we want you to play

lead, Mr. Sperry. So when we set out to write the script, every line we wrote we knew Gavin could live it.

LCM: In one of the promos for the film Gavin mentions, "I wish I could be like that man."

Rich: To me Gavin, himself, is becoming more and more like Jonathan Sperry and he would tell you that.



Jansen Panettiere as Dustin

LCM: I assume it was an honor and a lot of fun to work with Gavin MacLeod on this film.

Rich: Yea, a lot of fun. About a month before we started I went over to his house and Gavin and I went through the whole script to make any changes and Gavin had some really simple, little things.."could I change this word to this and I'd say this"... and made a couple really nice additions. When I left that day we were both 100% on the same page with the character.

LCM: What was the biggest difficulty in shooting the film?

Rich: The biggest issue we had was really the weather. The weather was all over the map.

LCM: The film takes place during the summer of 1970 which is now forty years ago. Do you think our society today is receptive to hearing about the Gospel and the life of Jesus?

Rich: I think society today is as receptive as it was forty years ago. In fact, I think it is almost more receptive today because there has been more exposure to Christian things. I think a lot of people have added Jesus to their life but they haven't made Him Lord of their life and there's a big difference. The Lord wants to be first. He wants to be Lord. Obviously we as believers struggle in our quest. I think there are more ways (now) to get the Truth out there to people.

LCM: In the movie there is a scene where Mr. Sperry makes a very pointed statement about the need for us to tell others about Jesus before it's too late. Some critics have felt that scene might be a bit over the top. What is your response to that?

Rich: I think the scene is right on. I don't think it's over the top at all. If somebody has seen the movie and says something to us, that's the one scene people say they remember. It's a very poignant scene with solid truth. I

think Jonathan Sperry shares the truth in love there. Critics don't bother me. I realize not everybody is a Christian. Jonathan Sperry is trying to make an important point to these three boys. It's a serious situation we need to think about. That's Gavin's favorite scene in the movie, probably mine, too.

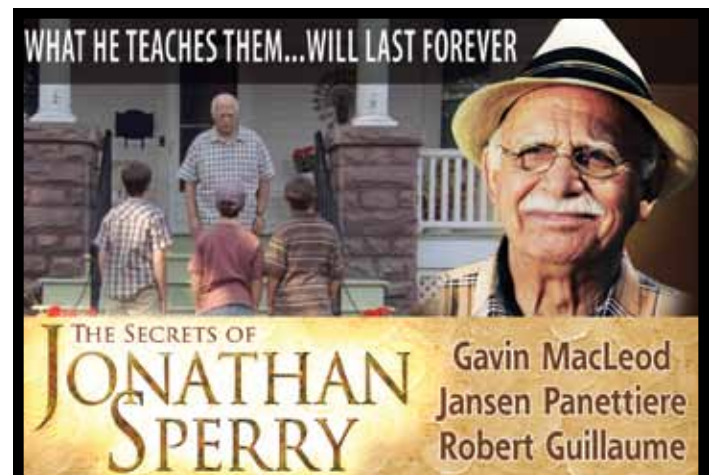
LCM: What would you like people to take away with them after watching The Secrets of Jonathan Sperry?

Rich: First of all I want them to have an experience. I want this movie to get deep into their heart. I want them also to recognize that the Lord is real, He wants to save them, He wants to help them, He wants give them eternal life, and He wants to use them to reach others.

And that's thing. We want Christians to be inspired to realize that "I have a purpose for living" and I want non-believers to think that "I can have a purpose for living."

LCM: What would you like to say to the churches in our area?

Rich: We want to give Christians the power to turn away from the secular movies they are being offered. Entertainment is like a drug, the God of this society, and people got to have their drugs and for the most part the



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Church plays defense. They complain to Hollywood, "Don't make this" or "don't do that" and that's not going to get it done. You've got to play offense. You've got to provide the alternative. This is the alternative. I think people will be entertained. There are some good laughs in this film, and I think they will be inspired.

LCM: Are there any other comments you would like to share with our readers?

Rich: I'd like to tell you a quick story. Gavin and I went to a showing of the film and there were about 250 people there. The host gave an invitation at the end of it and several people went down. Gavin was out sitting at a table and people were coming up wanting to talk to him and get his autograph and stuff. This little eight year old boy came up to him and said, "Mr. Sperry", he calls him Mr. Sperry, and says, "I want you to know you just changed my life." And Gavin just stopped everything and said, "What did you say?" "You changed my life. I just became a Christian after watching your movie." And Gavin almost started to weep. He's a pretty sensitive guy. He talked to the kid for about five minutes and prayed for him and said, "You're going to do great things for the Lord."

LCM: Wow. What an awesome story.

Rich: We've had some very touching e-mails and not just with young people. We had a sixty year old lady send

us an e-mail. She took her sixty-six year old sister who was visiting from Scotland. She wrote, "My sister was brought up in a Christian home but denied Him and never embraced the faith. In all my years, I've never seen my sister cry, ever, until she watched your movie. And I'm hoping the principles in that movie will make her remember her upbringing and that it will touch her.

And I've got one other thing for you. This lady sent me an e-mail. She said, "My husband has drifted badly from the Lord. I took him to see your movie. When we came home he said three words to me that thrilled my soul.

He said, "Where's my Bible?"

LCM: Rich, thank you. Thank you for your time, for your movies, and most of all for your heart. My prayer is that bringing this film to Macon County will bless hundreds, if not thousands of people in our community.

Rich: Thank you brother, and God bless.

Be sure to tune in to hear a live interview with either Rich Christiano or Gavin MacLeod on "Direct Line with Wayne Kent" on February 24th. Wayne's show airs on News/Talk 1340am WSOY radio from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m.




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