

# Story of local football team headed to big screen

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Some real-life events are so spectacular, so odds-defying, they deserve to be immortalized on film.

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For years, many in Lynchburg have thought the tale of the Shoeless Wonders — a football team comprised of orphans who remained undefeated for eight consecutive years — merited such treatment.

They were right.

“The second I heard the true story, I immediately was determined to find a way to bring it to the big screen,” Sara Elizabeth Timmins, producer and creative director for Virginia-based Life Out Loud Films said. “It’s an important story to bring to wider audiences. It’s inspiring.”

Life Out Loud Films will host a kickoff event Aug. 17 at the Academy Center of the Arts to celebrate the development of the film, which the company plans to shoot in Lynchburg.

In the 1920s, a group of boys from Lynchburg’s Presbyterian Orphans’ Home, now known as HumanKind, made national and international news for dominating on the field without ever wearing shoes, earning them the nickname the “Shoeless Wonders.”

“We speculate that it was because [the orphanage] was a working farm, and probably, the boys’ boots were boots — heavy and unwieldy and not allowing them to move at the pace they wanted to,” Bob Dendy, president of HumanKind said. “So, the speculation is they took off their shoes and they were faster and more effective and it became a tradition. ... They kept doing it until 1955.”

The junior club team played in the Lynchburg City League against recreational and school teams like Virginia Episcopal School, Dendy said.

At one point, a group of high school varsity players and City League stars came together and challenged the Shoeless Wonders to a New Years Eve game. The bigger and heavier players lost to the barefoot players, and by 1928, the team had difficulty finding opponents because of its success.

Eventually, they began to play games against high school teams from Appomattox, Farmville, Altavista, Crewe and New London Academy.

The original Shoeless Wonders team remained undefeated for eight years, from 1922 to 1930, and unscored upon for six. The tradition of the barefoot team continued until it disbanded in the 1950s.

Over the years, local newspapers, as well as those in Richmond, Baltimore and even China, reported on the story of the Presbyterian Orphans’ Home team. Film companies, including Universal Newsreels, published newsreels on

the boys.

Their shoeless style was depicted in the syndicated cartoon feature "Strange as It Seems" and in "Ripley's Believe It Or Not." The team even appeared on the front page of The New York Times' Rotogravure Picture Section in December 1926 next to pictures of the Army-Navy football game.

"It was a unique piece of American history and that's the most unique thing I think people ought to know," Dendy said. "We presented this to a lot [of] people, and as far as we can tell, it's the only shoeless football team in the history of America that was formal."

Timmins, who currently lives in Forest after moving from Smith Mountain Lake, and before that, Los Angeles, learned of the Shoeless Wonders when Dendy and his organization reached out to her for advice about how to share the story with a wider audience.

She convinced the organization to allow her company to make it as an independent film.

"When I came on board, it was a partnership," Timmins said. "HumanKind was a participant in the development of the story and gave approval to the script throughout the process. ... We worked very, very closely with them to honor the truth in the story and to tell something the area would be proud of."

Life Out Loud plans to begin filming in Lynchburg in the fall of 2017. Timmins said since the film will be shot entirely in Lynchburg, residents have a variety of ways to become involved in the project as cast and crew, extras and even as staff on the film.

"It's coming out of the community, so why not keep the community as involved as possible?" she said. "We want to make a film with the community — that they have a sense of ownership and pride that they were an integral part of making it happen. ... There's really a lot of opportunities to get involved ... outside of acting."

Timmins will discuss opportunities for residents to get involved with the project at the kickoff event. The evening will include a screening of "Wish You Well," a Life Out Loud film starring Ellen Burstyn based on the book and screenplay of the same name by bestselling novelist David Baldacci.

Baldacci, who will be in attendance, will participate in a Q&A following the screening. Other special guests include former NFL and Virginia Tech player Jake Grove.

The former All-American, who currently coaches at Jefferson Forest High School, will discuss the positive life skills learned through team sports, a message Timmins and Life Out Loud Films hope to highlight through the movie, along with the importance of adoption and foster care.

"In a time where our world seems a little crazy, I think it's a hopeful story that a lot of people are going to be able to relate to," Timmins said of the project. "These are young boys that were able to overcome their circumstances and prove that they weren't victims, and those are the stories we need more of. ... The film is a football story, but it's so much more."

