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INVINCIBLE

Cherry Hill's
Vince Papale
Goes Hollywood!

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INVINCIBLE

By Sally Friedman

Photo by David Michael Howarth

VINCE PAPALE is about to see his life story portrayed on screen when the Disney movie *Invincible* opens this month. It's been a long road from the football field to the Hollywood screen. And, for this deserving man who once made a living tending bar, that road has brought him to a very good place.

At first, it is his sheer energy that's so startling. Vince Papale throbs with it. Bristles with it. At 60, the man is as vibrant as someone half his age.

It is also Papale's zest for life – for every breath, every minute – that startles. Is there ever a day when this guy wears down?

Papale, a resident of Cherry Hill, was arguably best known when he became an Eagles player at the not-so-tender age of 30, becoming the oldest rookie in the history of the NFL. But there's so much more to the man than that, as the world will soon discover. The life and times of Vince Papale is about to be projected on the big screen in a Disney feature film, aptly called *Invincible*, scheduled for release late this month.

"I guess I've had an unusual life," Papale says as he reflected on those 60 years that began when he was born into a family that lived not just modestly, but humbly, in the projects of Glenolden, PA, near Philadelphia. "My father and grandfather were pig farmers, and we were poor but proud. Life wasn't easy."

It was particularly daunting because Papale's late mother, Almira, whose own remarkable life included a stint as a professional baseball player in the 1930s, became ill during Vince's childhood. "Until she was too sick to do anything much, I felt fabulous when I could win a race with her. She was an amazing athlete."

At Interboro High School, Vince Papale was a three-letter kid: football, baseball and track. He still holds the school's pole-vaulting record. "My salvation was being an athlete," recalls a man who got to Saint Joseph's College in 1964 on a track and field scholarship. "My Uncle Dominic used to tell me 'Vince, you're going to make a living with your legs,' and in



both a bit down on their luck...

Hollywood saw that video, got interested, and the rest is history, according to Papale, who had the unique experience of "optioning" his life rights to a producer who then hired a writer named Bard Gann to write the tale.

"They believed in my story, and so did Disney, which bought the script at auction in 2004," says the man whose football life will be in the vast public domain when the film debuts on August 25.

Playing the role of Papale is actor Mark Wahlberg. "He plays me better than

I do," quips Papale, who has become a close friend of the famous actor. Greg Kinnear will portray Dick Vermeil.

With characteristic passion, the Cherry Hill man immersed himself completely in the film project. "I was involved from script to wardrobe to every last detail," he says. "Mark Wahlberg told me that he would make me proud and make me cry – and he's done both."

The post-Eagles chapter of Vince Papale's life – the "real life chapter," as he calls it – has been involved with sports broadcasting and the world of commerce.



Vince Papale is a cancer survivor who has become a sought-after lecturer about survivorship.

After stints on both radio and TV, today Papale is Special Projects Director for Sallie Mae, the country's leading student financial aid company, thanks to the "coaching" of yet another mentor in his life, Tim Fitzpatrick.

Fitzpatrick, a Medford resident who had the vision to found Equity One, a company that innovated loans through non-conventional mortgages, is now CEO of Sallie Mae. Papale has traveled the road with him and will now literally travel the country for Sallie Mae representing a charitable foundation that targets at-risk youth.

But the most important chapter of this well-lived life is still being written.

Vince Papale is the enormously proud husband of Janet Cantwell, a former member of the USA World Gymnastics team, and the father of two: Gabriella, 12, and Vincent, 9. The three are, he will tell you, the light of his life.

Papale is also a cancer survivor who has become a sought-after lecturer about survivorship. In 2001, thanks to his wife's insistence that he have a complete physical, this remarkable physical specimen learned that he had colon cancer – and without a single symptom.

"I am so grateful – so very grateful – that my cancer was caught early and treated. And I knew right away that I would go public because cancer is nothing to be ashamed of."

So these days, football is not Vince Papale's only passion. Life itself is.

"For me," says a man who has crammed several lifetimes into one, "every day is Thanksgiving. Every moment is a gift." ■

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