



Wes Miller directs actor Corbin Bernsen who starred as the attorney Joseph Harrington, in Miller's film, *Prayer Never Fails*. Photo submitted.

Center Stage

Trading the courtroom for the big screen.

by Kathy Busch | kbusch@wufoundation.org

With his newest film, *Atone*, in production, **Lawrence Williamson, '03**, who now goes by his professional name, Wes Miller, feels he has finally stretched his muscles as a writer, director, and filmmaker. For Miller, *Atone* is like trying a case on his own for the first time as compared to an earlier film was more like trying a case in the Law Clinic. “For the first time, I really felt like I knew what I was doing,” Miller said. “Like my other works, *Atone* combines what is dear to my heart — faith and law. But this time, I found a maturity of voice. It just feels right.”

A standout cornerback at Lambuth University, Jackson, Tenn., Miller, had dreams of a professional football career. In his junior year of college Miller had to make a tough decision – pursue his love of football or find a path that would provide a stable life for his soon-to-be-born son.

“I was really at a crossroads in my life,” Miller said. “I knew I had to make a monumental decision. I considered pre-law or film production. The film production classes were full, so I went the law route. At that point, my grades weren’t great.”

I approached one of my professors about the possibility of attending law school following graduation. He told me I would have to really improve my grades to have a shot at law school. And, if I did, he would write a letter of recommendation.”

So, intent on raising his GPA, Miller buckled down, and his grades reflected his new found commitment to academic success. During his senior year, he began putting together his top 10 list of law schools to consider. The first nine slots were filled, and then Miller read about Washburn Law and added it to his list. He remembers telling his mother, Linda Williamson Jackson, “Wouldn’t it be funny if I ended up in Topeka, Kansas?” Her response? “Would you really consider moving to Kansas?”

As it turns out, the decision was an easy one. “It was the visit to Washburn Law that did it,” Miller said. “I knew immediately this was the environment I was looking for. The classes were small. It was a place that emphasized not just learning the law, but also the practical application. And so, Washburn Law it was.”

Three years later, degree in hand and graduating in the top 11 percent in his class, Miller, a single parent, began a career as a trial lawyer. Throughout his eight plus years of practicing law, Miller litigated cases involving employment discrimination, civil rights protection, consumer protection, and class actions. “For me, a case was never just a case,” Miller said. “It was the opportunity to help someone, to make a difference. I fought hard for my clients. I won my share of cases. But losing a case was hard – the disappointment in the face of a client was difficult to see.”

In 2008, Miller began to realize that law was not, perhaps, his final stop. “I’ve always been enamored of the law,” he said. “I’ve always considered it a platform to make a difference, to take a stand. But I began to do some soul searching and praying and wondered if this was where God intended me to be.”

It was a 2010 federal criminal case that proved to be the turning point in Miller’s career. After a long fought case and a verdict he hadn’t anticipated, Miller took some time to reflect on his career and his future. “That case took a lot out. I was emotionally drained,” he said. “But it allowed me to realize that the law was not my final calling. I have always had two loves – law and film. I used to binge watch episodes of *The Practice* and *The Verdict* in law school. For me, the two crafts overlap. They’re both about storytelling.” And a long period of prayer began.



Wes Miller, center, with actor Clifton Davis and Emmy-nominated actress Lynn Whitfield. Davis starred as Michael Brown in the film *Prayer Never Fails*. Whitfield played the role of Brown’s sister, Loral. Photo submitted.

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So, with a leap of faith, Miller moved to Orlando, Fla., at the urging of two Washburn law classmates, **Carlus Haynes, '02**, and **Brad Laurent, '03**, who had opened a practice in Orlando. Miller knew one thing for sure. His films would reflect his deep faith and his love of the law. In 2013, Miller’s first screenplay, *Beyond Justice*, was produced. He lost creative control of the project, but he built lasting relationships and learned the business of film. In 2015, Miller directed *Lily Grace*.

Prayer Never Fails, Miller’s third film, explores the issue of prayer in schools. It debuted in 2016 in the AMC movie theater in Ocoee, Florida, and across the state. It will be released worldwide in January 2017.

What’s next for Miller? He has two more films in development – *A River Runs Red* and *KINGdom*, about Martin Luther King Jr.’s last days in Memphis. “I’m still developing my skills. I haven’t quite located that complete competency yet,” he said. “But I look forward to telling these stories and then, we’ll see. But I know I’m where I belong.”