

'Benji' touts Christian theme

Mark Pattison/CNS

WASHINGTON — Is it possible that lovable movie mutt Benji is back after 17 years? It's not some shaggy dog story.

Joe Camp, producer of the first three "Benji" movies, is touting his Christian credentials in hopes of scoring, on a smaller scale, a Mel Gibson-like independent success with the latest in the "Benji" franchise, "Benji Off the Leash," which was scheduled to open Aug. 20.

"So many times I said, 'Benji can't change the world, God. Even you are having trouble doing that. Christ changed it once, but that was a long time ago,'" Camp said in a statement to parents to help promote the movie. "'Hang on,' said God. 'Keep your eyes and ears open.' And along came Mel Gibson. Once again, Christ changed the world."

Camp, who was raised Presbyterian, never wore his faith on his sleeve in the heyday of "Benji." But now, he's happy to do so, he said in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service from Atlanta.

"It was about time I took Christianity and my working life and shuffled the deck together," Camp

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said. Even before, though, he added, "God's always been a part of the process."

Camp, who now worships at what he calls a "Bible church" in California, said the new dog who would be Benji was found at an animal shelter. When the movie crew did location filming in the same town where the shelter was located, they feared someone would "show up out of the woodwork and say, 'That's my little dog.' Nobody ever did show up," Camp said.

The biggest complications arose close to the premiere date. Benji needed eye surgery just as Camp needed to promote the movie. Benji has healed sufficiently to go on tour with her — this time Benji's a she — new masters.

Because the new Benji was found

in a shelter and part of the plot of "Benji Off the Leash" deals with Benji being abandoned, Camp said he hopes it will spur more people to adopt dogs and puppies.

"When we did our location filming, the next month the shelter emptied," Camp said. "It was the best (adoption) month they ever had."

Camp told CNS that, like most producers, he's hoping for a big first-weekend box office. But, as an independent producer, the opening weekend means even more to him and the movie. A good box office take will prompt more theaters to show "Benji Off the Leash," and to show it for a longer time.

Camp said he was offered production and distribution deals, but at the cost of creative control.

"I saw what Mel Gibson was able to do without Hollywood, and I determined that we could do the same thing," he said. "Our core audience consists of families who truly care about what their children watch — a very similar demographic to the families of faith who supported Mr. Gibson's film."

While one target audience is children ages 3-10 who love cuddly animals, Camp said another target au-



Mulberry Square Productions/CNS

Joe Camp, producer of the first three "Benji" movies, takes a break on the set with his star canine. Camp's most recent film, "Benji Off the Leash," was due to open in theaters Aug. 20.

dience is parents who saw the original "Benji" flicks: 1974's "Benji," 1977's "For the Love of Benji" and 1987's "Benji the Hunted."

"We've got comedy in the film to make the kids laugh, but we also have a good story in the movie for parents," Camp said.

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