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Actor Mark Ruffalo said he's had a hard time melding his activism with storytelling.

Then Ruffalo encountered the story of the people of Parkersburg, West Virginia, who were exposed for decades to "forever chemicals" produced by DuPont, one of the world's largest corporations.

And he was moved by attorney Robert Bilott's 15-year battle to bring DuPont to justice, putting his family, his career and his health at risk for others.

"In a moment in time where the stories that we are being told are so cynical and the stories we hear all the time are like 'people are just horrible people' and 'just be as selfish as possible' and 'no one's doing anything for the greater good, really; it's all personal gain,' I believe in a different reality than that," Ruffalo said.

"I believe our heroes, real heroes in the world, are the ones who are like Rob Bilott. And so I just thought it was a story that we needed to see and hear at this particular moment in time, and it really suited where I was in my career to be able to bring something like this to life."

That's the real-life story behind the film "Dark Waters," which opened in wide release over the weekend.

Ruffalo produced the film and stars as Bilott. The story follows the attorney from defending chemical companies to taking them on after he is approached in the late 1990s by a farmer from his hometown who believes waste produced by the local DuPont plant is killing his cattle.

The movie also gets faith-fueled environmental activism right, according to Cassandra Carmichael, executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment.

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Throughout the film, Bilott and farmer Wilbur Tennant's Christian faith is portrayed matter-of-factly as a part of their lives.

Their depictions rang true for Carmichael, who works on environmental activism with Catholics, evangelical Christians, mainline Protestant Christians, Jews, members of the black church and Orthodox communities.

"From a faith perspective, we often try to carry the water for others, to help them when they need help, whether that's building the stage for their voice or being an advocate when their voice can't be heard or getting into the trenches with them and fighting injustice," she said.

"I think we also work really hard to shine a light on stories that need to be told from communities and individuals that are often not heard."

Ruffalo said during a call with faith leaders last week those depictions were intentional.

The actor recalled being approached by a man at a summer camp who questioned why Hollywood makes so many films that are hard on Christians. And he wanted to honor what is a serious part of "the reality of these people," he said.

In one scene in "Dark Waters," Bilott (as played by Ruffalo) frets over the cost of Catholic school for his sons as the ongoing lawsuit against DuPont takes a toll on his career, resulting in several pay cuts.

In another, his wife, Sarah Barlage Bilott (played by Academy Award winner Anne Hathaway), assures him, "You saw a man hurting and you did the Christian thing — you helped him."

Both Bilott and Tennant are depicted attending church — not at climactic moments in which a sermon ties together the movie’s message in a neat bow, but sitting with their families, singing hymns like "You Are Near," with its quiet assurance: "Lord, you have searched my heart, / and you know when I sit and when I stand. / Your hand is upon me protecting me from death, / keeping me from harm."

In the call with faith leaders, Bilott, who is Catholic, pointed to the late Tennant as his motivation for taking on the lawsuit against DuPont.

Tennant, the lawyer said, was "convinced that if people just see the facts and just see what's actually happening, the truth will come out, and people will do the right thing."

"Despite all of the legal wrangling over the years, I really do believe when people see the information, when people are given access to the facts, that people will do the right thing at the end. It may take a while. But I still believe that," he said.

That inspired Ruffalo and helped him to portray Bilott, the actor said.

So did his own diverse faith background, which he said not only motivated him to take on the role of Bilott and to produce "Dark Waters," but it has also grounded his activism over the years.

Ruffalo grew up with "a good part of the Middle East basically in my household," he said: Catholicism, a Baha'i father, a "born-again Christian" grandmother.

Later, he studied under famed actress and acting teacher Stella Adler, who was Jewish. Adler "really believed in the Talmudic principle of questioning and being aware," he said, and she taught him that the responsibility of an artist is to lift up the voices of people who aren't heard and to tell their stories.

Adler also introduced him to an idea he attributed to playwright George Bernard Shaw: "People should have to pay to go to church, and the theater should be free."

That's the moral, ideological and spiritual power of storytelling, he said. It transcends politics and ideologies and connects audiences to a common humanity.

"And so those teachings inspired me," Ruffalo said.

"I mean, those were heroes. Those were people who were doing things for other people at great sacrifice because they were the right things to do, and they were community-centered, and they were conscious of those around them, and there was a spiritual dimension to it — an important spiritual dimension to it."

Their example of "righteousness" and "care for community" led him into activism and social justice, he said.

Ruffalo identifies as an activist for the environment, for peace and for social justice — The New York Times has called him "the actor's activist."

He's spoken out against natural gas drilling in rural New York, delivered solar trailers to the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota during the action against the Dakota Access Pipeline and championed green energy on the board of The Solutions Project. Recently, he's lent his voice to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in the United States and Canada on social media and raised awareness of so-called forever chemicals, not just through "Dark Waters," but also an accompanying website, fightforeverchemicals.com.

"I really wanted to, at this phase in my career, use that celebrity to highlight these kinds of stories and these communities that unjustly had these issues happening to them and without any choice of their own," he said.

Forever chemicals like those depicted in "Dark Waters" have been linked to health problems such as birth defects, thyroid issues, liver and kidney damage and cancer, according to NRPE.

And the film doesn't present those problems as solved.

"You come out of that movie and you're like, what are we going to do?" said Carmichael of NRPE.

"It's this motivational film, which I think can be really beneficial as we try to raise awareness within the faith community," said Carmichael. "I personally like to give folks the sense of hope that we can do something about it and make some changes … in our personal lives, in our communities and also on the policy front to combat these things, these injustices that we find ourselves in."

It's a cause the executive director believes people of faith can get behind because of their concern not just for what they view as God's creation but also for vulnerable communities who are most affected by environmental injustice — children, communities of color, communities with lower incomes.

NRPE has produced a discussion guide for "Dark Waters," which includes prayers, reflections from both Jewish and Christian Scriptures and next steps to take — like contacting policymakers or minimizing the use of packaged foods and nonstick cookware that can contain forever chemicals.

More than just the story of forever chemicals, or one lawyer's fight against them, Ruffalo said, the film also tells "a bigger story about how we're going to go forward from here, knowing what we know."

"We're living in a time of revelations," he said. "We see now what our world is and what our world has been, and now we collectively have to make choices about that together."