

Wahlberg finds redemption in family, faith, action roles

by Norma Meyer

BEVERLY HILLS - Mark Wahlberg, the real-life ex-thug who plays a macho former Marine sniper in the new actioner "Shooter," started off this recent Sunday at home in a far more delicate role.

"I changed a big poogie diaper this morning," gloats the father of two. In a sec, he proudly divulges diaper-changing details, blow-by-blow.

"My son had woken up, so I went down to get him and smelled that big bomb ... "

Mark Wahlberg plays a former Marine sniper in "Shooter."

This same morning, as he does every week, the Oscar-nominated (for "The Departed") actor attended 8:30 a.m. Mass at his Beverly Hills church. Yes, bad boy rapper Marky Mark, who used to strip to his skivvies and grab his crotch onstage, is a devout Catholic with body ink as proof.

"I have a rosary tattoo around my neck," says Wahlberg, 35. "It goes all the way down to there."

Now he's got his preppy blue argyle sweater hiked up to reveal a well-toned chest tattooed with a string of rosary beads dangling a crucifix and emblazoned "In God I Trust."

He's a charmer, this one-time Calvin Klein underwear model who as a teen took out a man's eye and went to prison for it. In an interview in a hotel room, he amicably chats about everything from his hell-raiser youth in working-class Dorchester, Mass., to the charity he founded for at-risk kids, to his 3-year-old daughter Ella's preoccupation with pretending she's a pony.

"She goes neighhhh, neighhhh," says Wahlberg, imitating a horse. "She wants me to be a mean cowboy and drag her around on a leash."

That would be the leash of the family dog, a miniature fox terrier who is obsessed with retrieving golf balls. Wahlberg is also fanatical about golf. He has a driving range on his Beverly Hills estate where he lives with girlfriend-model Rhea Durham, the mother of Ella and 1-year-old Michael.

So these days, who constitutes the infamous posse of Wahlberg, exec producer of HBO's "Entourage," which

is loosely based on his life in Hollywood?

"Hmmm," he says pausing. "Maybe a nanny."

Since segueing from music to movies in 1994, Wahlberg has played a range of characters, including that well-endowed porn star in 1997's "Boogie Nights," a mastermind thief in 2003's "The Italian Job," and an NFL football player in 2006's "Invincible." In the fast-paced, guns-ablazing "Shooter," which opens today, he's gritty, smart, revengeful Bob Lee Swagger, a sniper-on-the-run who has been framed for a presidential assassination attempt.

To prepare for the role of the former Marine, Wahlberg took a crash course at a military sharpshooter school near Las Vegas. Training included walking on a beam 150 feet up in the air while carrying three weapons and ammo.

"That was the first time I realized that I now have fear. I was a thrill-seeker sometimes as a kid and I loved jumping off stuff and out of stuff," he says. "We're up on this beam and the wind's howling and I've got to go up with all this equipment and shoot all these targets and my leg was shaking. I had to locate the targets, measure the distance, shoot the targets and crawl back."

As his heart pounded, he says, he flashed on his children. "The little munchkins," he sighs.

It was also hairy getting to the remote locale for the climactic scene of "Shooter." For five days, a helicopter ferried cast and crew in and out to the top of Rainbow Glacier near Whistler, B.C., a trip the on-screen action-hero dreaded.

"I don't like to fly, period," Wahlberg says.

He was a white-knuckler long before he reserved a seat on doomed United 93, the hijacked plane that crashed on Sept. 11. Wahlberg, who was visiting family in Boston, changed his plans and decided to drive to New York and fly on to Toronto to see friends.

"I do not try to think about it too much. I've had a couple of other near-death experiences - on planes, in streets, in the neighborhood, stuff happens. That's why every day I wake up with my eyes open and I thank God first."

He says he also prays every night.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

Growing up, he ditched church to hang out on the streets.

"I grew up with great parents that had to spend most of their time putting food on the table. I'm the youngest of nine kids. They both worked one or two jobs at a time. I was left to my own devices and I'd get into trouble."

Trouble meant stealing cars, peddling drugs, getting into fights and worse. When he was 16, he hurled a racial epithet at a Vietnamese man he encountered on the street carrying two cases of beer and then clubbed him over the head with a wood stick. As he fled from police, he hit another man in the eye, blinding him. Wahlberg was sentenced to two years in adult prison after an assault and served 45 days.

"I always wanted to be one of the guys, and I finally arrived the day I arrived at Deer Island House of Correction," he says. "I realized that was not what I wanted to do with my life and that's not what I wanted to be."

When he got out, brother Donnie, a member of the hit teenybopper band New Kids on the Block, helped Wahlberg transform into pop idol Marky Mark.

"I got a \$100,000 advance from a record company and I went out and spent it all on a Mercedes. Yeah, it was a bad idea," he says, shaking his head.

Before long the dancer-singer, who was known for his rippled physique and dropping trou, was modeling undies for Calvin Klein.

"I made a point early on in my film career to make movies where I kept my clothes on. Because people were constantly associating that with my past," he says. In "Shooter," he bares his chest because the role "calls for it - I'm not going to do it just to do it." (Besides, his pecs are also bullet-punctured and bloody.)

His rosary tattoo, which he got when he was about 25, is hidden by makeup in the movie.

"I was given a pair of rosary beads when I was in prison by a very special woman. I was wearing them for years and they were kind of worn out and broke, and I just decided one day I was going to get a tattoo and put it around my neck."

Nearly six years ago, he established the Massachusetts-based Mark Wahlberg Youth Foundation, run by his brother, Jimmy, who also had a troubled past. The nonprofit claims to have raised and distributed nearly \$1 million to inner-city youth groups. Last Thanksgiving, the foundation provided a sit-down turkey dinner for 700 South Los Angeles families.

"I just know I've been put in this position for a reason, and it's to give back and help," he says.

The reformed rebel planned to be up early the next day to golf - and if his biceps aren't already boulders he was going to pump weights and undergo boxing training for three hours for his starring role in "The Fighter," in which he'll team up again with "Departed" co-star Matt Damon.

Since Wahlberg was the only character alive at the end of "The Departed," there's also talk of a sequel focusing on his foul-mouthed Boston police sergeant.

"Possibly, yeah. We'll see what the script's like."

Life now is "simplified," although his old posse partying pals think it's boring "because I don't take them out anymore. I'm not hanging out. I'm home being responsible."

That means diapering the wiggling 1-year-old and reading Superman and Ninja Turtle books with Ella when he's not being her cowboy. His children are too young to know he's a movie star, although his daughter "says 'Daddy works really hard to buy her a princess bed.' She has a bed with all the Disney princesses on it. She loves it."

He seems such a choirboy and then he mentions he's going out to dinner tonight with the guys while his girlfriend watches the kids.

"But I'll be in bed by 9," he says with a grin that just might be sincere.

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