

San Diego New-Media University Sees . . .
A Future Of Helping A Hundred “*Bella* Films” Flower

By DEXTER DUGGAN

SAN DIEGO — Just as a darkened movie theater is illumined by the iridescent images on the screen, a renewal in entertainment can illumine a darkened culture. Curtain going up on a new vision for entertainment.

Students and staff at John Paul the Great Catholic University here had even more of an interest in the recent nationwide opening of the pro-life movie *Bella* than many other moral traditionalists.

This is the kind of movie that students at this new-media university have come here to learn to make and finance, so that one day not only one *Bella* a year but 100 or 500 inspiring, moral messages will be hitting the screens and heartening souls.

Not only is a nephew of *Bella* star Eduardo Verastegui studying here, but also a number of John Paul the Great U. students were hired by the movie’s funding company to promote

Bella, working out of the university student apartments that were vacant for the summer, the head of the school said.

Fifty students, half of them from John Paul, did “a lot of phone calling” across the country, university president Derry Connolly, Ph. D., told *The Wanderer* in a late-September interview in his office.

“The fundamental thing with those [*Bella*] guys is in their heart. They have a deep love for the Lord . . . so helping them was the right thing to do.”

Now in its second year, John Paul the Great Catholic University arose from an inspiration Connolly felt as he followed a technology career with Kodak, IBM and as director of the University of California-San Diego’s Center for the Commercialization of Advanced Technology mentoring programs.

In the new-media age, Connolly explained when *The Wanderer* previously visited the school last January, the days are gone when a few major companies in Los Angeles controlled everything people saw.

Now, he said, an individual can put something on the Internet that goes around the world overnight. “Now the door is blown wide open” with access to distribution in the media.

At the school’s web site (www.jpatholic.com), Connolly has written: “The Catholic influence on the media is near rock bottom, but is enjoying a small but passionate resurgence in Hollywood. New media, which is evolving and maturing daily, is poised to radically change the landscape of the media industry. An orthodox Catholic university can be a critical centerpiece to the resurgence. San Diego is a hub for innovation in new mediaenabling technology and is geographically very close to the creative center of the industry in Los Angeles.”

Two Major Messages

Opening in September 2006 with 30 students and occupying half of the second floor of a business-park building in the Scripps Ranch area of northern San Diego, John Paul the Great began its second year this September with 63

students filling the entire second floor plus two sections of the first floor.

The school has grown, Connolly said, from 4,400 square feet to 7,800 square feet, which includes a fourpew- deep chapel with the Blessed Sacrament reserved and Mass there once a week. He is avid to enroll more students.

The largest room, a studio/classroom, is 1,250 square feet and can seat 120 people, Connolly said.

With plans for a permanent campus in the future, the school currently houses students at an apartment complex about halfway between the classrooms and San Diego's Good Shepherd Parish church, where daily Mass is available.

One student told *The Wanderer*

that he'll be able to look back and tell future students that in his day, he had to walk for 20 minutes to get to Mass and 20 minutes to get to campus.

Connolly said 15 apartments are in use this year, while the student body, about two-to-one male last year, has a lower percentage of males this year, divided about 60-40.

The school offers two majors, a B.S. in communications media with a concentration in entertainment media, and a B.S. in business with concentration in entrepreneurial business.

The idea, briefly sketched, is that some students will focus on becoming writers, directors, producers, owners, and investors in film, television, animation, interactive media and the stage. Others will learn to create, lead, manage, sustain, and develop entrepreneurial product and service companies at the intersections of communications media, technology, and business.

Connolly told *The Wanderer*

there were two major messages the school wanted to impart to students in the previous academic year. First, "a lot of the curriculum kept drumming into them" the importance of developing a good story that people will watch. Second, "Start understanding that all of this is a business" that will enable them to feed their families.

"I think that got hammered into them pretty well. . . . You have to understand the business around the product you're producing," he said. Asked how many years it will take before he knows if John Paul U. can make a go of it, Connolly replied, "There's only one way, and that's forward. We're not going backwards. . . . It's sustainable at this stage."

One problem, he said, is the cost of private education. "The harsh reality is that private education is expensive."

Federal financial aid for students isn't available until the college is halfway through the accreditation process, which is a year and a half away, he said. "That's a huge detriment." Tuition the first year was \$18,000, while room and board was \$5,000, Connolly said, adding that the cost has increased by \$750 this year.

Students learn financial responsibility by having an outside job while at school, he said, but they shouldn't be doing it more than 20 hours a week. He said one student was riding the bus nearly an hour each way to work, then concluded it was better to have a job only a brief walk away.

As for learning to run their own entrepreneurial businesses, Connolly showed

The Wanderer a business-incubator room at school where students can set up a desk, phone, and fax machine. Any type of business can provide the experience, he said, with the goal of having a media business at graduation. “One guy’s starting a picture-framing business.”

A Big Leap Of Faith

Last year’s student body president, Chris Hirniak, 25, from the New York City suburb of New City, told *The Wanderer* that deciding to attend the fledgling school all the way across the country took faith.

“It was a big leap of faith to come out here. . . . Any time you take a leap of faith for God, He catches you and uplifts you,” Hirniak said.

As for the school, “I would like for it to be a bastion of Catholic thought. I’d like it to be a home for Catholics.”

He hopes the school will come to occupy a vital role in Catholic life. “If you want to reclaim what’s God’s . . . you have to go to JP Catholic. That’s what I’d like to see. And honest to God, I think it will happen.”

Spoken with the enthusiasm of one who spent his summer working as a recruiter for the school.

Regarding the school’s mission, “If you put a good movie out there, you can reach 10 million people on a weekend,” he said, thereby helping to “tak[e] back what’s really God’s anyway. . . .

“You involve Christ and you will be anointed,” Hirniak said. “No matter where you are, God’s grace will reach you. . . .

“For a society that preaches openness to homosexuality and everything like that . . . you bring Jesus Christ to the conversation and people will shut you out,” he said. “. . . The people who supposedly are open-minded will shut doors in your face.”

But, he said, moral traditionalists shouldn’t shut themselves off from the world. “Other people, the media, they’re not the enemy, they’re the battleground,” he said. “. . . We’re fighting the culture of death. We’re fighting *for* these people.”

Ron Briseno, the school’s new director of development, told *The Wanderer* it’s of equal importance to raise funds for the school and spread the word about John Paul the Great U.

He said that if *Bella* succeeds — showing what can be done through a small, independent film company and grassroots marketing — it could give a boost to JP’s student recruiting.

Good Shepherd pastor Fr. Michael Robinson welcomed the students and staff back for a new year at an afternoon Mass at his church on September 23. In his homily he held up a favorable article from the previous day’s

San Diego Union-Tribune about a film promoting homosexuality titled *For the Bible Tells Me So*. Secularists want to redefine the terms of right and wrong, Robinson said, and “then where are we going to be in promoting the Gospel? . . .

“We need to be ready, as St. Peter says, to give a reason for our hope,” he said, adding that through film, the Internet and other communications, “we, as children of light,” must be able to respond and to proclaim the person of Christ, “to truly give the world a reason to hope.” The school is at 10174 Old Grove

Rd., Suite 200, San Diego 92131, phone 858-653-6740.

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Late News: Because of the Southern California wildfires in late October, John Paul the Great U., like other area schools, canceled classes, but its campus and student housing were safe, Connolly said. Because “air quality is very poor outdoors,” students were staying inside, praying for the San Diego community, and having fun, he said on October 23.