

## **PRODUCING A FILM SCHOOL**

### ***The history of Chapman University's film school***

When Robert Bassett was hired in 1981 as the first full-time faculty member to teach filmmaking in the Department of Communications, there were a handful of students, one camera, a tape deck to record sound, one upright Moviola editing machine, and a couple of Lowell lighting kits. There was no film department. No film school. Chapman was not yet even a university.

Although he was teaching both production and the language of film, Bassett wanted to get his students more excited about the process of filmmaking. The result was the first location film project, when Bassett took some 30 students to Death Valley during the Interterm session in January 1983. They camped out in the desert, sat around the campfire in the evenings and worked together on a film for days. "That experience was the genesis of the film school today," he says. "It moved things forward and started everyone thinking larger."

Student interest grew and along with it the program grew. New faculty and courses were added. More equipment was purchased. In 1992, the program became a separate Department of Film and Television.

By 1996, the film department had mushroomed to 210 students and nine faculty members, becoming the School of Film and Television with Bassett as the founding dean.

But that was just the beginning. Bassett began to wonder what would distinguish Chapman's film school and how it could capitalize on its location close to the heart of the industry in Hollywood. The result was a radical idea. Why not build a film school based on a studio? One with sound stages, great post-production facilities and a state-of-the-art theater. Why not create an environment where students could use industry standard tools as they learned their craft?

Soon, Bassett began sharing his vision with others in the community and talking about the power of film and its growing impact in shaping society. As he often says, "Film is the literature of this century. When I went to school, we all wanted to write the great American novel. Now, young people want to make a great film."

Bassett was driven, but he was also lucky. He met "angels" along the way who supported his vision and always seemed to come to his aid when it was most needed. Chapman trustee Marion Knott was there from the beginning.

At one point, when Bassett felt they needed an expensive high-quality camera to elevate the quality of the program, he wrote her a letter asking if she knew anyone who would help the school buy one for the students to use. The next day, he was astonished to receive a check from Marion Knott to cover the cost of four cameras. She made a number of gifts over the years, including endowing the Marion Knott Filmmaker-in-Residence program. Although she always supported the film school without any expectation or desire for recognition, she did acquiesce to the naming of Marion Knott Studios in recognition of her \$5-million gift in 2004.

Cece Presley, granddaughter of the legendary Cecil B. DeMille, was another early believer in what Chapman's film school could be. She introduced Bassett and the film school to top industry insiders. She was the first one to give money to build a new film school facility, long before plans were even in place.

In Orange County, Twyla Martin was another community leader who listened to Bassett's vision and became an unstoppable advocate for what became their shared dream; her support in many areas included endowing the Twyla Reed Martin Dean's Chair in Film and Media Arts. Others joined in to help build what they saw as a needed community asset. Paul Folino, CEO of Emulex Corporation, a long-time supporter of local arts organizations, became the chairman of the campaign to build the new film school. And, he made a major gift to name the 500-seat theater Folino Theater in the new studio.

In an article in *Coast Magazine*, writer Terence Loose captured the challenges Bassett faced this way: "Creating a first-class film school is not unlike making a movie. You start with nothing but a vision and a strong passion, recruit talent and deploy them in their fight against the inevitable setbacks and challenges of any grand undertaking, and finally, hopefully, a blockbuster product flickers to life. And, of course, there's the money. You'll need a lot of it."

The incredible \$20-million gift from Larry and Kristina Dodge transformed the future of the film school and resulted in the naming of the Lawrence and Kristina Dodge College of Film and Media Arts. Their gift, as well as a stellar faculty (who have, among them, made more than 500 feature films—a record no other film school can match) and the completion of the new Marion Knott Studios, all contributed to the national and international acclaim that Chapman's film school now enjoys.

In the early days, Bassett says, the students interested in film were the ones who "didn't want to read books." Times have changed. Today, students in the Dodge College have the highest average SAT scores in the university. Only one in nine applicants is offered admission.

Building on Robert Bassett's vision born more than 30 years ago, Dodge College now has more than 1,500 students, 48 full-time faculty, 89 adjunct faculty, a complete graduate program, a micro-budget feature film production company offering key creative positions to Chapman alumni, and international exchange and travel programs that take students to locations around the world to make films and documentaries. Chapman student films have been accepted and honored in film festivals from Sundance to Telluride, from Bermuda to Beijing. Applicants routinely apply to Chapman alongside the other top film schools in the country, USC, NYU, and UCLA.