



CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY
DODGE COLLEGE
OF FILM AND MEDIA ARTS

Producing a Film School

The history of the Chapman University film school

When Bob 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 the language of film, Bassett also wanted to get his students 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 the film for days. “That experience was the genesis of the film school today,” he says. “It propelled 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, a state-of-the-art theatre, and a backlot. 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 signed by 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, long before plans were even in place. Twyla Martin was another community leader who listened to Bassett's vision and became an unstoppable advocate for what became their shared dream. Many 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 arts organizations in Orange County, became the chairman of the campaign to build the new film school. And, he made a major gift to name the 500-seat theatre ~ The Paul and Daranne Folino Theater ~ in the new studio.

In an article on Bob Bassett in *Coast Magazine*, writer Terence Loose once wrote "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 named the *Lawrence and Kristina Dodge College of Film and Media Arts* in their honor. Their gift, as well as a stellar faculty (who have, among them, made more than 100 feature films—a record no other film school can match) and the completion of the new Marion Knott Studios, have all contributed to the rising acclaim 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. In addition, only one in seven applicants is offered admission.

From that vision of Bob Bassett more than 20 years ago, the Dodge College now has 1,100 film students, 34 full-time faculty, some 50 adjunct faculty, and a complete graduate program. Chapman student films have been accepted and honored in film festivals around the world, including Sundance and Telluride. Applicants routinely consider Chapman among the top film schools in the country, along with USC, NYU, and UCLA.