

Monday, February 16, 2009

Hollywood-style production celebrates students' passion for film, faith

By **Dave Groves**, news editor

About six years ago, Aaron and Marilyn Burns spent a summer tinkering with a video camera in the backyard of their parents' Ortonville home. The movie they made had both its charms and shortcomings, but most important to them was the fact that they enjoyed making it.

"We had a lot of fun and just figured, 'Why not do it again?'" Marilyn explained. "When we did it, it just kept growing as we went along."

Truth be told, the current Oakland University Honors College students had little idea at the time that they'd end up with a full-length, feature film that took three years, tens of thousands of dollars and more than 500 volunteers to complete.

"A lot of people caught the vision and signed up," Aaron said. He and Marilyn noted that without the generosity, expertise and enthusiasm of their parents, family members, friends and one-time strangers who helped with virtually every aspect of production, "Pendragon: Sword of His Father" never would have been completed.

Today the brother and sister, supported by several cousins who also are part of the production team, are busy marketing the film they wrote, filmed and edited.

Set in A.D. 411, Pendragon relates the story of Artos, the son British Chieftain Justinian the Pendragon. After his coastal village is destroyed and he is taken as a slave by Barbarian raiders, Artos escapes and is inspired by God to help his countrymen defend their people and land. He finds great success on the battlefield, but soon is confronted with a devastating choice between honoring the girl he loves and the people he is called to defend.

Marilyn and Aaron appear in starring roles, built sets, made costumes, composed the film's score and coordinated shoots at locations in five states.

Marilyn said aspiring to create a Hollywood-style film turned out to be as much a learning experience as it was a creative endeavor.

"Some of what we did was from experience and a lot of it was just trying some crazy things and learning from that," she explained.

Originally having planned to complete the film after two years, the production team decided in 2007 to extend the project another year in order to improve parts that they felt didn't live up to expectations. Aaron said the decision meant having to reshoot about one third of the 110-minute film.

On more than one occasion, Marilyn questioned whether she'd ever get involved in such a monumental undertaking again.

"I wasn't so sure about that in the middle of the project," she said, adding that she's had a change of heart since people have seen the finished product. "The film has obviously changed and inspired people, and that really convinced me that I want to do it again."

A mission the Burns Family Studios adopted in creating Pendragon was to convey the message that God assigns each of his followers a mission in life and that there is both wisdom and reward in following it. Aaron said coupling that message with an interest in making movies was an easy fit.

"We realized the impact that film has on our culture," he said. "Any person is more likely to quote a line from a movie than they are from a politician's speech or the Bible. I mean, film is the most powerful medium out there."

Marilyn added that they story they created also was highly conducive to the team's goal.

"The setting of the film is a powerful tool to capture that message," she explained. "The history of it is something that really captures the imagination."

Having screened Pendragon at the GrizzDance Film Festival and for a number of church congregations, the Burns have received a great deal of positive feedback.

"Usually we blow people's expectations away, because they're thinking, 'Oh, it's just another home movie made in someone's backyard,'" Aaron said. He added that despite many challenges, he never lost faith that the team could achieve a high level of production quality.

"It was interesting because our message was that if you follow the mission you're given, God will provide everything you need," Aaron explained. "We watched that prove itself out as we went through the process. The Lord really did provide."

The Burns are expanding their current marketing efforts to reach a greater number of viewers, particularly Christian families. The effort will include sales not only through the film's Web site, but Christian retail sites and bookstore chains.

The Honors College will host a dinner conversation with the production team and a screening of Pendragon at starting 6 p.m. on Monday, March 9. The event will take place in the banquet rooms of Oakland Center. Tickets for dinner and the film are \$25 per person. For more information or to make reservations, call (248) 370-4450. Reservations are required by Friday, Feb. 27.

For more information on the film, visit the Burns Family Studios Web site at <http://burnsfamilystudios.com/movies/pendragon/>.



Oakland University Honors College student Aaron Burns starts as "Artos" in "Pendragon: Sword of his Father."



[Oakland University Honors College student Marilyn Burns starts as "Wenneveria" in "Pendragon: Sword of his Father."

SUMMARY

Aaron and Marilyn Burns played central roles in creating a full-length, feature film that took three years, tens of thousands of dollars and more than 500 volunteers to complete.

