



PEELING OFF THE LABEL

By Mimi Wiggins Perreault

Pursuing excellence in your work for Christ is more than just using an adjective to describe yourself; it's truly making a difference.

Peeling off the Label

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eing in the world but not of the world has never been an easy formula for Christians to live out in daily life, and that's certainly true for those who work in the public square.

At BestSemester's culture-shaping programs, the goal is to help students learn how to be Christians who live and work in entertainment, politics, news and public service—but not necessarily in “Christian” jobs in “Christian” offices.

At the Washington Journalism Center (WJC) in Washington, D.C., students learn to look beyond the boundaries and represent all stories with journalistic excellence. The program teaches students to strengthen their reading, reporting and writing skills, and prepare for the challenge of working in the mainstream news media.

“From the variety of speakers we had at the Summer Institute of Journalism, it was clear that being a Christian in the workplace doesn't mean being a liberal or a conservative,” said Ariel Emery, a Northwestern (IA) grad who attended the Summer Institute of Journalism in 2004 (now the Washington Journalism Center), and currently works as News Editor at the *Northfield News* in Northfield, Minn. “But from those guest speakers and from my own experience, I'm seeing that it means being especially careful in giving all sides of a story, being consistent and even just being dependable as an employee.”



Warren Pettit, CMC director

Playing one particular note doesn't make a song “Christian,” neither does mentioning God or Jesus a set amount of times. Yet, playing truthfully and honestly is essential to glorify God through music.

Emery said she is challenged daily to live her life in a way that represents Jesus, without adding “Jesus is Lord” as a tagline to her stories, but rather by being a silent witness and a positive influence in her newsroom.

Sometimes being a Christian is easy to hide in your art, but for students like Rachel Belgard, an Australia Studies Center (ASC) Fall 2008 student from George Fox University, her graphic design's excellence reflects her morality and basic Christian values.

For her, it is not labeling it “Christian Graphic Design” or using Christian symbols that will make an impact, but rather the fact that her designs are subtly influenced by Christian virtues and values. Belgard said as long as the companies she designs for use ethical practices to create their products, they don't necessarily have to be a Christian company. When she freelances on design projects, she reserves the right to say no to products or ad campaigns which she feels are unjust or use unfair practices.

Matthew Von Herbulis, another graphic design student in the program, said that being mindful about his source of creativity and inspiration is an

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important way to demonstrate his Christian values, even if those values aren't explicit in every project he undertakes.

"The truth and creativity entrusted to me are desperately needed in a world searching for answers," Matthew said. "I commit my talents to the principles of truth, beauty, creativity and excellence found in the gospel... To a visual world, I design to reveal a new, ancient world vision."

ASC program director Kimberly Spragg observed that how one person represents their faith within their career can be different from another person.

"In the ASC program, we talk quite a bit about how faith does and should influence a person's vocation and/or art," she said. "Yet we always agree that how it influences each person's artistic expression is unique and open to wide creativity. There is no one right answer to this question."

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The Los Angeles Film Studies Center (LAFSC) program holds a similar view, as its purpose is to integrate a Christian worldview with an introductory exploration of the work and workings of mainstream Hollywood entertainment. According to program director Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran, who also serves on the planning committee for Reel Spirituality, a think-tank for filmmakers and theologians sponsored by Fuller Theological Seminary, those working on a film sometimes may not know the nature of what they are working on until the movie is released in its final product.

Ver Straten-McSparran said the most important part of being a Christian in Hollywood is not necessarily making Christian movies, but rather being involved in a Christian community where you can talk about the culture you are in. She said they encourage students and alumni of the program to stay in contact with others through their alumni network and by getting involved in local churches. By discussing the culture that they live in, Christians can co-exist with the Hollywood culture.

Jamie Pettito, an LAFSC alumna, said it is important to understand that Christians in the film industry should not make solely "Christian movies," because they have the responsibility to grapple with the struggles of humanity so that God can redeem and renew the world.

"Humans cling to that with which they are familiar, to that with which they can relate," Jamie said. "And films on evil, destitution or even plain everyday life can be just as striking to the soul as films on honesty, trust, love and faith." Jamie also said that by remembering she works for God, she can sometimes make it through days that would be hard otherwise, and so her faith has become more and more of a personal stronghold rather than a crutch in the secular film industry.

For Contemporary Music Center (CMC) alumna Tina Parker (Fall 2003), working in the Christian music industry does not always mean working with just Christians. Parker works for Thomas-Vasquez Entertainment, a Christian artist management company that manages five acts. Parker is based in Nashville, Tennessee, where she works as a marketing and events manager. Previously, Parker worked for Third Day and had the responsibility of working at non-Christian venues, often with large non-Christian crews.



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"When I was on the road with Third Day, we would encounter people who were not necessarily believers," Tina said. "My job was to serve well the people from the security guard to the promoter. Sometimes people were a little apprehensive with how we were going to act. We had to act professionally and treat people well and not necessarily preach to them."

Tina said that when she finished the CMC program she was looking mainly to go into secular music, but discovered that with the skills she learned in the program, she would be comfortable in either the secular or Christian music industries. She said that being able to work in a secular environment is essential, because even being involved primarily in a Christian industry does not mean you will always work with Christians.

The American Studies Program (ASP), also based in Washington, D.C., teaches students that vocation is more than a job or career. ASP tries to instill in students an emerging awareness of who God wants you to be, not just what He wants you to do.

"ASP does not focus so much on the tension between being in the world, but not of it, as much as we explore what it means to be in 'the story,'" said Dr. Peter Baker, the Program Faculty and Internship Director for ASP.

Dr. Baker helps students get plugged into internships on Capitol Hill and in the Washington, D.C., area. Through their work at national and global organizations, students gain perspective on how they fit into the public sphere and can write their own story. Students learn the challenges of working in both secular and Christian organizations while living in a community eight blocks from the U.S. Capitol.

"The sacrifices and sufferings associated with our labor often serve as stark daily reminders of our present separation from our loving Creator," Dr. Baker added. "Even so, we believe that this is God's world we live in."

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