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Southwest Scene

St. Francis Grad's 'Titanic' Project

By Annemarie Mannion. Special to the Tribune.

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In the blockbuster movie *Titanic*, smoke seemed to puff from the ill-fated ocean liner and water crashed convincingly through doors and into cabins, leaving audience members either marveling at the spectacle or gripping the edges of their seats.

To realistically portray the sinking of the massive ship, Hollywood had a little help from Carey Villegas, a 1993 graduate of the University of St. Francis in Joliet.

Sinking ships are not his only specialty, however. Villegas has created simulations of earthquakes, fires, floods and other calamities as a computer graphics wizard for major motion picture studios. More than 100 students from the university and from several local high schools turned out recently at the college to learn how Villegas helped sink the ship while creating a soaring career.

Paul Darin, 15, a sophomore at Joliet Central High School, was impressed by Villegas' resume, which also includes work on the films *The Fifth Element*, *Dante's Peak* and *Michael Collins*.

"I find it really informative," Darin said after the session in which Villegas showed a video of digital effects used in *Titanic*. "I want to take more classes," added Darin, who hopes to focus on areas such as graphic arts, fine art, miniature modeling and photography.

Villegas would applaud. He said that the university emphasizes basics such as art, drawing and photography that he uses daily in his work. Although knowing the latest high-tech gadgets and computer software is fine, Villegas said having a well-formed artistic sense is even more important. "You have to understand art," he said, "how shadows are cast and [how] reflections [look] on water."

Tom Brodnicki, the university's vice president for advancement, said he wanted young people to realize that a solid liberal arts education can take a graduate to Hollywood or any place they want. "Hollywood seems far away and *Titanic* is a big deal," he said. "But the arts here are so important. You don't have to be at a university where you have all the bells and whistles."

Villegas estimated he logged 90 hours a week during the year and a half he worked on *Titanic*. Despite that, he retained a sense of humor: his final visual for the audience was a picture of the *Titanic* with a computer-added sign that read, "Sink Me."

for more information about Carey Villegas, visit