

Joliet Native Can Sink a Ship With the Click of a Mouse

TITANIC TASK • CAREY VILLEGAS

Helped Create Climactic Movie Scene

January 12, 1998 (Joliet, IL)

If you stay for the credits after the mega-hit *Titanic*, you'll see the name Carey Villegas under the list of digital composers. Villegas, a Joliet native, is only 27 years old and considered one of the brightest young stars in an fast-changing industry.

Villegas worked on one of the movie's most unforgettable scenes, where the flooded ship breaks in two leaving the stern poised at 90 degrees just before being swallowed by the sea. The passengers scrambling about, the smoke rising from the ship's stacks, even the water are all computer generated. As a Flame artist, Villegas simulates on film events like volcanoes, earthquakes, explosions and shipwrecks that couldn't otherwise be portrayed.

"I love my job," Villegas said. "I'm working with the most talented people in the industry."

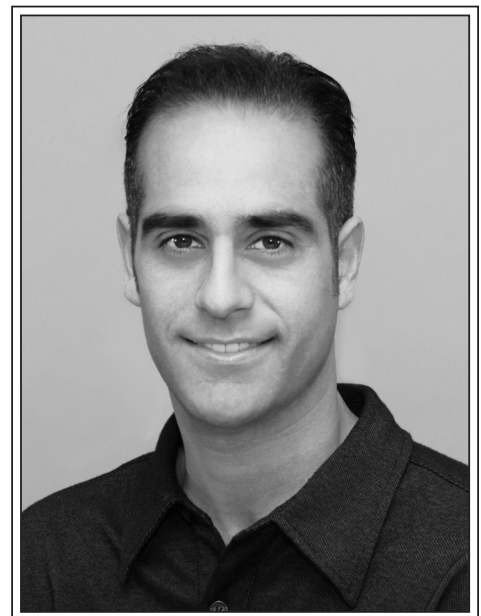
Surprisingly, *Titanic* was not Villegas' first movie. He's also worked on *Chain Reaction*, *Dante's Peak*, *The Fifth Element* and *Michael Collins*, as well as the Michael Jackson video, "Ghosts" and the Celine Dion video, "My Heart Will Go On", besides many TV commercials.

JOLIET BEGINNINGS

Villegas, JT Central homecoming king of 1988, a 1993 honors graduate of University of St. Francis, always seemed destined for success, if you talk to his family or former teachers. He was an honors student and outstanding athlete. He won a national video award while still in college. He's still well remembered by teachers.

His mother Nicolina, who is known as Barbara, remembers him as a child who always loved the movies. His father Nate died when Villegas was only 7. As single-parent, his mother raised Villegas and his sister Liesl, making a living cleaning homes and buildings through her own business.

His mother remembers Villegas started producing videos at the age of 9, videotaping weddings, communions and other events. "Carey has always been ambitious and persistent. I recall when he was about 8, he became interested in juggling and comedy, and he stayed up all night several nights until he mastered juggling eight



RENAISSANCE MAN. "it gives me enormous fulfillment to take an idea when it is still only a vision and turn it into reality on the screen."

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balls at once. He progressed to juggling rings, cigar boxes, torches, long swords, and later, to my horror, a chain saw. He learned to balance five or six chairs on his chin and various objects on his nose.” Then Villegas added a comedy routine to his juggling act and performed all over town. With the money he earned he bought his video equipment.

“Show business was always in his blood as a kid,” remembers sister Liesl, a 1990 USF graduate. “Lights, camera, action’ was his favorite phrase as we were growing up. He always had a story to tell, acting as cameraman, director and stunt man all in one. He once climbed to the top of our roof to do a scene for a science fiction movie he was videotaping. I always knew he was going to be a success.”

‘HE DOES IT ALL’

“He’s a Renaissance man,” remembers JT Central soccer coach Pat O’Connell. “He was a good goalie. A great kid. A juggler, too! And he put a shower in my mother’s basement, so he was also a plumber. He does it all.”

Senior year, Villegas was named men’s tennis Most Valuable Player, and was awarded a full tennis scholarship to University of St. Francis. At USF, Villegas and fellow student Chis Clark won a Chicago cable award for Best Student Produced Video for a Public Affairs Program. Their video, about Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Will County, went on to win the Associated Press National Award for Best Show at the Associated Collegiate Press national convention.

“This was the first time our university won national recognition, said Rick Lorenc, who heads the journalism/communications department at St. Francis. “Carey set a standard that encouraged others to excel. He was always a leader, always looked to by other students for advice.” Villegas was president of the university TV club. “He was especially effective with editing, with camera work and in video production,” Lorenc said.

INTERNSHIP OPENS DOORS

Villegas interned at a Chicago company called Editel and Lorenc said managers there said Villegas was the best intern they ever had. Starting out in the accounting department and then becoming a digital effects artist, Villegas worked at Editel for 2 1/2 years. Making that transition was never heard of, he said. This made him the youngest effects artist in Chicago working at the largest post-production company in the city, Villegas explained. He worked on commercials for companies like Kellogg’s, Reebok, Subway, Sealy, Chevy, Boston Market and the McDonald’s ‘95 Superbowl.

Villegas learned Flame software at Editel, then moved to California in the summer of 1995 to start work at Digital Domain with the legendary James Cameron, company founder and co-owner. He, who now lives in Santa Monica, has contributed to many award-winning TV commercials at Digital Domain, one of the giants in computer imaging.

CHALLENGING JOB

He worked on “Terminator 2 3-D: Battle Across Time”, which now plays at Universal Studios in Florida. “It is the most expensive and challenging 3-D movie ever made,” Villegas said. He explained how an enormous amount of work went into the 12 1/2 minute movie, where each scene is shot with two cameras at the same time, so each special effect has to be created twice. “This doesn’t just double the amount of work, it increases it tenfold, he explained.

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What's next? He's been appointed digital effects supervisor for a new movie, *What Dreams May Come*, starring Robin Williams and Cuba Gooding Jr. The film, he says, calls for extraordinary special effects.

Villegas says it's a challenge to keep up in his chosen field. "It's not enough to master the tools of the trade, because you have to be able to adjust to a constantly changing technology. That means you must be able to keep up with new computer software as it's developed." But Villegas admits the primary tool of a digital effects artist is an eye for detail. "It is important to study photography, art, lighting, and, if you're going to get into 3-D productions, you'll need math and physics. You have to know a lot about color, motion and animation. You're recreating what you see in real life."

Villegas says he enjoys working with people who like to see their professional abilities pushed to the limit. "The challenge is very exciting and it gives me enormous fulfillment to take an idea when it is still only a vision and turn it into reality on the screen." But his mother says her admiration for her son goes deeper than just his career achievements.

"I'm very proud of him and happy for all his successes, but what I am most proud of is the kind, loving and caring attitude that he expresses to everyone he meets. This is what really warms my heart and makes me smile."

for more information about Carey Villegas, visit

