

St. Mary filmmaker wins prize, thanks to 'God's guidance.'

It's been quite a ride, possibly a supernatural one, for Christopher Strackbein, the former youth and young adult minister at St. Mary, Annapolis, who never dreamed he'd make it into the filmmaking winner's circle.

The 29-year-old Navy veteran and Villa Julie College, Stevenson, video and film student is, to his great surprise, the grand prize winner of a Microsoft student film competition that earned him \$30,000 and \$5,000 for the parish which played the key role in his four-minute video, titled "And the world goes 'round.'"

"The odds were against me for sure but I believe that this film was seriously inspired by God," he said.

"It was way too much for me to handle on my own," said Mr. Strackbein, who added that now he can afford to marry his fiancée, fellow parishioner, Kate Perry, and think more realistically about having a family.

And, he thinks that even discovering the competition in the first place, just two and a half weeks before its deadline, was a matter of divine intervention.

He happened to be browsing through the Web site, "Facebook," an online directory that connects people through social networks at colleges, when he noticed a link to Microsoft's 2.0 Student Film Competition, called "Heroes Happen Here"

He clicked on the link, "and then it began," Mr. Strackbein said.

Things happened fast and furiously. There was very little time; he didn't have any video equipment of his own, and he had no idea what his film would be about other than following the required theme of portraying unsung heroes - relatively ordinary people whose extraordinary efforts get little recognition.

"It was amazing, though, everything began to slip into place, and quickly," Mr. Strackbein said.

When he served as youth minister at St. Mary a year and a half before, Stephen Beard, the parish's director of religious education, lent the aspiring young filmmaker some video equipment to use in his youth program. Once he heard about the competition, Mr. Beard, with parish support, was only too glad to lend him the video technology again to complement his rented equipment. After all, Mr. Strackbein's video was to be about St. Mary, but in what particular way, the student filmmaker wondered?

"I would be driving along, listening to music on the radio, and ideas would just come to me, as though they weren't really mine," he explained.

The main idea that came to him was to feature Ken Cheney, the parish and school's technology director.

Dependent in so many ways on computer technology, "the parish and school would be lost without him," Mr. Strackbein said, "and no one really knows what he does and how important it is." Mr. Cheney was the perfect fit for Microsoft's "Heroes happen here," and of course to Mr. Strackbein, they happen at St. Mary, the parish that is so close to his heart and his life.

With the enthusiastic support of his father, Bruce Strackbein, former Grand Knight of the Annapolis Knights of Columbus Council 1384 and his mother, Kathleen Whelan Strackbein, a 1969 alumna of St. Mary High School and a cantor at the church, Mr. Strackbein got very busy.

First he had to convince Mr. Cheney to accept the lead role, which took some doing, and then he needed the permission of St. Mary's pastor, Father John Kingsbury, C.Ss.R. to do some videotaping in the church.

"They won't even let you put a tripod on the floor during a wedding there," Mr. Strackbein said, "and we were going to use much larger equipment, including a big dolly. I was so worried he wouldn't go for it, but he said 'do it,' and I was even more sure that God was guiding me."

Since all the scenes were to be shot in the church, church grounds and in the school, he also had to get the permission of school principal Charles L. Reiter, which he

willingly gave.

There wasn't much time to accomplish the actual shooting, some 72 hours, but in much the same way as all the earlier obstacles had somehow been smoothly overcome so, too, did the shoot itself succeed, just in time.

But Mr. Strackbein needed music for the video, and operating on a shoestring budget, that would be a serious problem. But, once again, a door was opened.

"I took a chance and asked a friend of mine for the use of his band's record album to use a few of the tracks for the audio for the film," he said. "They agreed to let me and, since it was a self-recorded album, they had the permission to allow it without having to go through their record label. The band is Farewell Flight and the album is Northern. The music really adds to the film and inspired me to write the opening scene and hallway scene, the best parts of the film."

So, what is the film really about, other than Mr. Cheney? You can see it on the internet. Here's the link: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=E0bTDr1tV9g>

As surprised and grateful as he was that he won the competition, Mr. Strackbein said he was the most surprised that Microsoft would pick such an overtly Catholic video.

"It was all St. Mary's, and all so Catholic and I really didn't think they would go for it for that reason," he explained.

But they did. It seemed only fitting. After all, Mr. Strackbein is convinced that his two and a half week filming odyssey was somehow divinely inspired and directed.

And now, Mr. Strackbein is making another video for another competition. "This one's even more Catholic," he said. "So we'll see what happens."

Any bets?