

A Campus Gift for the Ages



Sam Vitale ('05) works on the construction of the new Grotto of Our Lady, the Holy Mother of God.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF the word *grotto* is from the Italian, derived from the Latin for “cavern” or “crypt.” It is perhaps thus fitting that a new grotto on the CBU campus should be designed and primarily constructed by a student named Salvatore Vitale.

Salvatore “Sam” Vitale, as vice president of finance for the Student Government Association, was involved in deciding what gift the 2005 SGA would leave behind on campus for future students. “It’s been a fairly recent tradition for the student government to leave something better than they left it for the succeeding classes,” he explained. In the past few years, the SGA has replaced the patio furniture on the Buckman Quad outside the Buccaneer Grill and have invested in new pool tables and game equipment in the dorm and campus lounges.

“We wanted to do something different,” Vitale explained. “When we asked for suggestions on a gift, a lot of students said we should provide something religious or inspirational instead of something recreational. And something more permanent. Eventually, we settled on the idea of a grotto.”

When the SGA proposed the idea to the university’s administration, it was met with enthusiasm. Brother Stan Sobczyk and Dan Wortham, vice president for administration, weighed the available locations on campus and settled on a vacant “crossroads” near Signaigo Soccer Field, where walking paths diverge toward Buc Baseball Field or De La Salle Chapel.

“We looked first at the area around the Madonna of Peace grotto near the Grove,” Wortham said. “We also looked at the area where the Founder’s shrine was destroyed by the windstorm a couple of years ago, and at couple of other areas throughout the backside of the campus. We decided that it probably should be

somewhere near Lambert, mostly because Sam designed it be ‘more rustic and contemplative’ in nature—the woods and the back campus would lend itself to this. We decided on the final location because of the traffic patterns; it would be seen daily by students walking over from Stritch, Avery, and Oakdale and by the Brothers living in Lambert.”

The grotto was designed as a rounded niche constructed of brick and then covered with smooth river rocks, standing about five feet tall and enclosing a statue of the Blessed Virgin. A bed of shrubbery and flowers surrounds the grotto, and a small concrete bench is positioned to one side. Wortham says that additional decorative lighting will be added to the path, which should also enhance the space.

Vitale says the design of a grotto was inspired by one at his parents’ home in St. Louis. “I saw it as a place to pause and reflect,” he said. “It could be a place to stop and pray for a few minutes a day, to strengthen your faith, or just to have a few quiet moments away from it all.”

A civil engineering major, Vitale already knew something about construction and had experience with concrete from working summers for his father’s company, Vee-Jay Cement Contracting. But working with brick and stone was new to him. “The concrete was the easy part,” he said. “After that, I was in completely new territory. All I can say is that God must have been working through us.” Vitale was aided and abetted in the construction by Adriane Wilkinson, J.P. Masterson, Hank Pitts, Vance Gamble, Bobby Lawrence, and other fellow students. “A lot of people helped out here and there. It was a true community effort,” he said. “That was a big part of the whole idea, that we were going to make this gift ourselves. We weren’t going to just buy something or even hire a contractor to build it for us.”

Vitale, who was honored by his fellow seniors with the Thomas Lipsmeyer Award for his contributions to the class and to the university, returned to Saint Louis after graduation to take a full-time job with Vee-Jay Cement. But he also has another job waiting for him there. “I’ve been commissioned to design and build a grotto in St. Louis,” he laughed. “Maybe it’s my destiny to be a grotto builder.” ■