

THE PASSION OF ANDREWS UNIVERSITY

by Katie Shaw

In case you've ever wondered what one thing could make students, alumni, faculty, staff, and community members unite for a single cause, Andrews University has the answer: God.

During the weekend of April 10-11, 2004, nearly 9,500 people witnessed Christ's life, death, and resurrection during the second annual Easter Passion Play. A team of young adult leaders, plus a small army of 750 volunteers, helped to pull this off. Kristin Denslow (director), Heidi Whitehead (co-director), Lauren Chadwick (assistant director), and Jeremy Carscallen (drama director) volunteered hundreds of hours to piece together what became one of the best experiences of many lives.

Because of the recent release of Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ," there was even more interest this

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Pharisees condemn Jesus' blasphemous statement claiming He is the Son of God

year from the press and the secular community in AU's version of the passion. After the weekend, countless stories were told of people who were touched by the play and how they reacted to seeing their Savior's love in such a tangible way.

Jorge Benavides, a veteran play volunteer and religion major, signed up to be one of the thieves on the cross in the crucifixion scene. This year, his wife and two small sons also participated because it had been such an incredible experience for Jorge last year. During the second performance day, Jorge shared with Ron Whitehead, the play's faculty sponsor, that his father was dying in El

Salvador. Ron said, "He told me that his heart was breaking because he couldn't be with his father, but acting in the Passion Play was a comfort to him. It reminded him that even if he never gets to see his father on earth again, he will in Heaven."

Andrew Roquiz, also a second-year volunteer and pre-med/music major, was Prayer Coordinator and had arranged for continuous intervention during the weekend. Stationed in a room in Pioneer Memorial Church, one of the greeters came in to see what was going on. Andrew said, "As we prayed, I looked up and noticed tears streaming down her cheeks. I knew the Holy Spirit was touching this lady through our humble prayers."

David Gillis, architecture major, and Michelle Angulo, Seminary student, were asked to assist artist Arnol Diaz in set design and construction. They both had backgrounds in art, and were happy to assist, as long as it didn't cut into their personal lives too much. But the play had a way of consuming their free time, and soon both were eating and sleeping the project. Particularly



proud of the Pilate scene, which was much more elaborate and impressive than the previous year, David and Michelle had visions of fame as the columns and pediments were placed on the lower roof of the Art & Design Building. Another person assisting them suggested that the set be anchored with wire in case of wind since it was largely made out of Styrofoam. Although David was reluctant to take the suggestion, just as their assistant was climbing the ladder with wire in his hand to secure the set, it happened. David said, "The palace lifted up with the wind and then smashed down, proceeding to tumble, crack, twist, break, and fall gracefully into a heap of Styrofoam, wood, and cardboard." They and fourteen volunteers worked through the night just before the play and were able to reconstruct it. Michelle commented on how it changed her and David's view of God: "This mishap changed our perspective on the greatness of God in one instant. It is God's grandeur that counts, not our human efforts."

Russell Worthen, a clinical laboratory science student, decided to sign up to be part of the Garden of Gethsemane scene. He had recently been struggling with some personal issues and received some bad news just a week before the play. He wrote: "Not only did this [involvement with the Passion Play] get my mind off of the troubles at hand, it really gave me

some perspective on my life. After the Passion Play, I decided I wanted to reaffirm my faith in Jesus and start to live more of the way that He would want me to live."

Ben Juhl lives in Elkhart, Ind., and works in nearby South Bend. He heard about the Passion Play from a friend at Andrews and wanted to get involved. One of the men playing Jesus decided to step down, so Ben took the

opportunity and was cast as Christ. He received a special blessing because of the nature of his role. "I spent hours focusing on the script, on the Scriptures where the passion story is told, on extrabiblical writings like *The Desire of Ages*, and on creating the experience, as far as possible, from an actor's perspective. All that amounted to a great blessing for me! The gift of salvation meant a lot to me before, but now it means so much more."

Alo Lafo works for the Center for Youth Evangelism and is mom to Sebastian, 15, Nathaniel, 12, and Leaisa, 8. She sat down with her kids at the beginning of the school year and said that since this would be their last year at Andrews (her husband, Eliu, will graduate from the Seminary this summer), she wanted the family to participate in the Passion Play. The boys are also part of a drum corps and were scheduled to take a tour to Alabama during the play weekend. They didn't want to be in the play, but Alo held her ground and prayed that they would come

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Ben Juhl did extensive research in preparation for his portrayal of Christ

around. "As the Passion Play drew closer," Alo wrote, "I no longer heard them complain about it or bring up Alabama anymore. During the Passion Play weekend, they were so excited about it. They even mentioned to me afterward that they were happy they didn't go to Alabama."

Rachel Parrish, nursing major, was scene director for the crucifixion. She witnessed many tears during the weekend, but also had a lighter story to share. "Because of how the crucifixion scene is set up,



Alo Lafo depicting Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the crucifixion

Countless stories were told of people who were touched by the play.

the crowd gets too thick at times for small children to see. During those times, I would take several of the kids from the back to the side of the scene so they could see what was going on. One of the kids I took to the side was about four years old. They watched the soldiers nailing Jesus to the cross for about 30 seconds, then turned to me with a distressed look and said, 'That's my Sabbath school teacher crucifying Jesus!'"

Diane Coon, premed major and an angel for the resurrection scene, told about a relative that had been struggling in her relationship with Christ and attended the play. "She came to me after the resurrection scene and said, 'If anything could have increased my faith in God, this was it.'"

Jamie McLamb, elementary education major, served as a tour guide this year and received a lot of comments about the play. After one rotation finished, a lady approached her. "With tears streaming down her cheeks and more in her

eyes, she thanked us for our powerful performance. She was from a Benton Harbor high school and had brought her Christian drama group of about 20 students plus adults to see the Easter Passion Play. She said that they had all been deeply touched and continued to thank us.

She commented that she wanted to bring her pastor back the next day (Sunday) so that he, too, could see the Passion Play. Praise God!"

We will never know how many lives were touched as a result of the Passion Play. What is evident, though, is that Andrews University has taken ownership of this awesome responsibility that God has given us. Community friends are eager to donate funds and goods, faculty and staff members have another way to live their Christianity, students can find themselves and their Savior in the process, and alums, like you, can feel proud of their alma mater and its eternal impact. Saving lives for Christ, that is the true passion of Andrews University.



Ellis Merritt, senior religion major, portrayed Pilate for the second year.

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