

The Courier News: Fox Valley Weekly

Elgin: 'Veggie Tales' creator at Judson's Imago Film Fest

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By Nina L. Dulabaum special to the courier news

The creator of Veggie Tales is coming to Elgin next week. Phil Vischer, a writer, actor and animator, will be one of two keynote speakers at the weeklong Imago Film Festival, hosted by Judson College. A "Night with Phil Vischer" begins at 7 p.m. Tuesday.

"Vischer's story of starting with an inspired idea and then working hard to make that idea literally come to life is like the theme song for this festival," states Darren Wilson, professor in the Communication Arts Department at Judson College. "The films in this festival all began with inspired ideas from aspiring, hardworking filmmakers who want to learn how to make it big."

In his new book, *Me, Myself and Bob: A True Story About God, Dreams and Talking Vegetables* (Nelson Books, 2007), Vischer shares his journey from the creation of Veggie Tales and Big Idea Productions to his present-day work at Jellyfish Studios in Wheaton.



His creation of the kids' television series, in which talking vegetables impart humorous and morally sound life lessons, has involved his whole family. One day, he was working on a character in the shape of a candy bar. His wife, Lisa, walked by and said, "You know, moms are going to be mad if you make their kids fall in love with candy bars," and that's when Larry the Cucumber was born, according to the book.

Dr. Terry Wandtke welcomed guests to last year's Imago Film Festival at Judson College.

So what important message does a successful creator of a lively children's film series want to pass on to others? Vischer shares in the book that one of the things he has learned is: "God doesn't love me because of what I can do for him. He just loves me -- even when I've done nothing at all."

The Third Annual Imago Film Festival will be held Monday through Friday. Starting off as just a one-day special event, this festival has grown fast and has become popular with students as well as members of the community.

"The very first film festival was for Judson students, staff and faculty. The next year, we opened it up for national submissions," explained Tonya Hudson, director of communications and marketing at Judson College. "Basically, we went from one evening with a handful of student films to five evenings with more than 20 films from all over the country and more than 400 people attending."

Festival directors and Judson professors Darren Wilson and Dr. Terry Wandtke are expecting an even bigger crowd to come through this year due to the commercial success of keynote speaker Vischer.

"I'm excited about this year's festival, because it shows that interest in films of spiritual significance isn't a passing fad," said Wandtke. "We're seeing deep reflections on faith in our film submissions -- in mainstream movies, like *Stranger Than Fiction*, which is featured in the festival, and in the ideas of thinkers like Phil Vischer and Robert Johnston, also featured at the festival."

A special program will include a workshop, presentations, discussions and screenings of short films by aspiring filmmakers from across the country, culminating in an awards evening honoring this year's top films.

The events will begin at 7 p.m. every evening in the Marjorie Hall Thulin Fine Arts Performance Hall at Judson College, 1151 N. State St., Elgin.

All events are free and open to the public. Reservations are recommended, and there is a limit of five tickets per person. For reservations, e-mail filmfestival@judsoncollege.edu; for a list of films, visit www.imagofestival.com.