Emmy-nominated filmmaker Vera Drew (CDM ’11) unpacks comic commentary in the vlogosphere. See page 8.
Hollywood Reporter Honor

“The Hollywood Reporter” named DePaul’s School of Cinematic Arts (SCA) one of 2020’s Top American Film Schools. The respected listing acknowledges film students and schools have had to adapt to the challenges of education during a pandemic.

“But no matter how they are handling the pandemic, all of The Hollywood Reporter’s top film programs are committed to ensuring their graduates will be ready for a career in Hollywood, whatever it may look like,” says SCA Director Gary Novak. “Being acknowledged as a top film school speaks to the passion and commitment of the school’s faculty and staff as well as our students’ creative talent and the quality of their work.” Read more in DePaul’s Newsline.

Studio CDM Documents Remote Initiatives

When DePaul University quickly shifted to a remote learning model last spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, College of Computing and Digital Media (CDM) students and faculty rose to the challenges of learning, serving and thriving remotely. Studio CDM, headed by the college’s Manager of Production Operations and School of Cinematic Arts (SCA) adjunct faculty Benjamin Kumming, has been highlighting some of these inspiring efforts—from making PPE for Illinois health care workers to hosting virtual chats with renowned cinematographers—in short videos. View the videos here, and look for more to be posted later.

“Tom of Your Life” Film Release

“Tom of Your Life,” a film written, directed, edited and scored by Jer Sklar (CDM MFA ’19), was acquired by Gravitas Ventures and released September 1 through video-on-demand providers. Conceived as a humorous, music-driven fable exploring the meaning of life, the film follows a child, who ages four years every hour, and a nurse who takes him on the road to let him experience the world on the one day he’ll have to live in it. The film was shot at locations in Wisconsin and Illinois, including St. Vincent de Paul Church on DePaul’s Lincoln Park Campus.

Animation Jam Goes Virtual

On May 1-3, SCA’s annual animation jam, Mayday, went virtual. More than 130 students RSVP’d to the event, with 90 attending the kickoff on Friday night. There were a number of events over the course of the weekend, including panels with animation program alumni, trivia, and figure drawing sessions. Students produced more than 30 minutes of animation content on this year’s theme, “kink.” Watch the compilation here.

D.E.F. Showcase 2020

The DePaul Experimental Film Showcase screened online on June 6. The 80-minute screening block features 41 DePaul student films that span many forms of the experimental filmmaking medium. This is an annual collaboration with the DePaul Art Museum, and the showcase will also screen there once the museum reopens.
Cybersecurity Champion

School of Computing student Alina Kuzmenkova was a member of the regional team that won first place in the 2020 US Cyber Challenge National Championship in early October. Kuzmenkova, a member of the DePaul chapter of Women in CyberSecurity and DePaul’s women’s tennis program, was also named to the 2019-20 BIG EAST Conference All-Academic Team. US Cyber Challenge is a private-public partnership program dedicated to identifying, attracting and recruiting the next generation of cybersecurity professionals.

Trackmania Soundtrack

Adjunct faculty Elliot Callighan, who teaches several game audio courses at CDM, composed and produced the music for the newest installment of Ubisoft’s Trackmania, an online multiplayer racing game. Callighan’s company, Unlock Audio, also recently formed a strategic partnership with Periscope Post to provide integrated sound and music services for games.

Alumni Games at PixelPop

Two video games designed by DePaul alumni were showcased at PixelPop Festival, an annual St. Louis-based indie game conference and expo that was held online September 12-13. “Homing,” in which the player navigates a messenger pigeon through a city to deliver letters, was created by Michelle Lega (CDM MFA ’20), who has worked as a narrative designer at Chicago’s Fear of Corn video game studio. “Cold Calling,” created by Thom Cote (CDM ’19), Austin Frick (CDM ’19), Cole Funck (CDM ’19) and Brett Prank (CDM ’19) for another indie Chicago video game studio, Can’t Get Enough Games, is an alternate-history comedy adventure in which a White House switchboard operator must facilitate negotiations among world leaders during the Cold War.

Alumnus Commemorates St. Vincent de Paul

Cole Andersen (CDM ‘19), who studied at the School of Design, presented his artwork commemorating St. Vincent de Paul to the university last January. The portrait is displayed in the third-floor hallway of the Lincoln Park Student Center. It was inspired by the mural above the Cacciatore Stadium, the bronze statue of the late Monsignor John Joseph Egan near the Student Center, and the Chicago skyline.

“To me, the statue, mural and city skyline represent the idea of merging the old and the modern days into how St. Vincent’s values feed into today,” says Andersen.

Alumna Michelle Lega’s “Homing” game simulates a messenger pigeon’s flight.

School of Design alumnus Cole Andersen with his St. Vincent de Paul portrait
Teen participants in the CHA + DePaul Youth Partnership program used iPads to make documentary films.

Through the veins of DePaul runs its Vincentian mission as the university community asks itself our essential question: What must be done? Three youth outreach programs designed to teach skills and build interest in computing and creative careers are CDM’s response.

**CHA + DePaul Youth Partnership**

What would happen if kids from underresourced areas of Chicago were surrounded with tools to help them amplify their voices to tell their own stories?

That’s the question that led Liliane Calfee, an instructor in the School of Cinematic Arts (SCA), to forge a partnership between DePaul University and the Chicago Housing Authority and devise an intensive program focused on art and media education. The **CHA + DePaul Youth Partnership** is a part of the city’s One Summer Chicago initiative, which offers employment (participants are paid $14 per hour) and internship opportunities to Chicago youth.

The six-week summer program trains 12 to 16 young people between the ages of 15 to 20 who live in public housing. In 2020, the three tracks offered included documentary filmmaking for girls, movie and TV scripts, and photography. Computers, iPads and still cameras were distributed to the students so they could learn safely in the midst of COVID-19. DePaul faculty and/or industry leaders and DePaul graduate students mentor participants in projects of their own choosing.

“It’s a seed we plant,” says Calfee, who is the program’s director. “It provides them with this confidence and belief that their stories should be told.”

Since the program’s launch in 2016, projects have touched on themes such as gun violence, bullying, female empowerment, the culture around Black hair and homelessness.

Program administrator Michael Flores, who is an SCA assistant professor and a documentary filmmaker, says the students make him want to work harder. “I get inspired by what the students make. It makes me want to go out and make more powerful films,” he says.

**DeSports**

With COVID-19 canceling in-person classes and activities at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) this fall, the timing lent itself to a new after-school pilot program that, by its nature, meets kids where they are: playing video games.

The DeSports program is a new initiative funded by a grant from CME Group Foundation that involves CDM, DePaul’s Department of Psychology, and Orr Academy High School and George Washington High School, both in the CPS system.

E-sports, in which individuals or teams compete on the video field of battle, may seem like all fun and games. However, Associate Dean Lucia Dettori, an
associate professor in the School of Computing, says e-sports foster important skills, such as collaboration, communication and critical thinking.

“We’re really trying to say, ‘Hey, this is a passion that you have. We’re helping you develop some skills that are critical for you generally, and we want you to start thinking about possible careers that might be related to this passion, and majors in college that will get you there,’” says Dettori.

Students meet after school (virtually, for now) and develop strategies, resolve conflicts and work together toward a common goal. DePaul’s gaming and computer science students serve as mentors, and faculty arrange for speakers from the gaming community and local technology companies to connect with the students and talk about career options. A group in the Department of Psychology that studies online gaming communities will conduct research associated with this initiative.

Kevin Ryan, who designed the framework of the DeSports curriculum and teaches English and drama at Orr Academy High School, is excited to see the ways that students learn through the program. When Ryan was growing up, his generation’s parents saw video games as a waste of time. He’s thrilled to see that attitude change and to partner with DePaul to be a part of the new endeavor.

“A lot of the program is sort of a meta conversation about what makes a good gamer, but also what makes a good and successful person,” he says.

**Digital Youth Divas**

Whether they’re designing bracelets with LED lights or learning to code, the middle-school girls participating in the Digital Youth Divas program are getting a taste of how fun science, math, engineering and technology (STEM) can be at a crucial age. “We focus on the middle-school grades because we know that’s where identities are forming,” says Denise Nacu. Digital Youth Divas is organized by Sheena Erete and Nacu, who are School of Design associate professors and co-directors of CDM’s Technology for Social Good Research and Design Lab, in collaboration with Northwestern University’s Office of Community Education Partnerships.

The program is designed to encourage more girls from traditionally underrepresented communities to consider STEM careers. Since its launch in 2013, around 500 girls have participated in the program. College student mentors and STEM program providers contribute to the program and actively encourage the girls’ parents and family members to participate. The program is funded by a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation to help researchers determine how STEM learning ecologies work.

“An ultimate goal for us is to understand what it takes to encourage girls so they can see themselves as scientists, as technologists, as engineers, as designers. What would propel them to make decisions in high school and college that would encourage them toward those fields?” says Nacu.

As the participants are learning, students at DePaul, who conduct research and interact with the girls and their families, are working to answer those questions. What they learn could ultimately help draw more girls—and their families—into STEM studies over time.

“IT PROVIDES THEM WITH THIS CONFIDENCE AND BELIEF THAT THEIR STORIES SHOULD BE TOLD.”

—Liliane Calfee, SCA instructor
EHI Design Research Lab
Christina Harrington, assistant professor in the School of Design, is an expert in participatory design, which democratizes process innovation by involving more stakeholders and empowering underserved populations. Using her expertise in this area, she created the Equity and Health Innovations (EHI) Design Research Lab in 2019.

“Innovation is pretty commonly known in the design space, but the introduction of equity really emphasizes that our work focuses on making sure design is fair and just for all populations,” Harrington explains.

The EHI lab’s work “centers on those who are typically neglected in both health care and the design of health care systems,” she adds. “Designing technologies that are specifically anti-racist and considerate of those marginalized because of their racial identity, we can truly push forward design that considers everyone.”

Two graduate school students and two undergraduates volunteer in Harrington’s lab, funded by a National Institutes of Health grant. For a relatively new lab, the grant is “a big success,” Harrington notes.

Three initiatives address racial inequity in health care

EHI Design Research Lab
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Black Maternal Health
Associate professors Enid Montague and Sheena Erete are co-principal investigators studying birth and death rates connected to pregnancy, “measuring the differences in experiences related to race,” Montague says.

The project, which began in 2018, “is designed to collect stories about birth experiences in the Chicagoland area,” she explains, empowering people “to share the diversity of their experiences so mothers, researchers and health care providers can learn from them.”

Doctoral candidate Ashley Loomis (CDM MS ’19) “helped design and create content for the project’s website, literature reviews and survey questions that collected the stories,” Loomis explains, noting the project fills a need because “Black maternal health is still underresearched and underfunded in typical public health spaces. Policies, public health interventions and research tend to focus more on the baby than the mother.”

“These stories are helping us to develop better tools that can capture different experiences in health care related to race and inform new designs that reduce health inequities,” Montague adds.

Automating Equity
Montague, Loomis and graduate student Amal Almansour also have a COVID-19 research project “to build models and requirements of what should be automated in health care that consider racial inequity first,” Montague says.

“Many models of technology design systems and implementation don’t consider the effects on health care workers, who were experiencing very high levels of burnout before COVID,” she adds.

“The pandemic motivated me to pursue this work sooner rather than later because we need design guidelines to reduce the burden on exhausted workers, while simultaneously increasing quality for marginalized patients,” Montague notes.

After DePaul created its Contributing to the Understanding of COVID-19 initiative, it awarded a grant to Montague and her team to ramp up their research.

Montague concludes, “We’re uniquely positioned, and the grant is a great opportunity.”
A School of Design instructor leads a cottage industry of makers protecting essential workers from the novel coronavirus

They’ve Got You Covered

Amid the bleakness of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Illinois PPE Network is an inspiring grassroots success story. Comprising volunteer makers of personal protective equipment (PPE) across the Chicagoland area, the alliance was seeded at DePaul’s Idea Realization Lab (IRL) by its director, Jay Margalus, a School of Design instructor.

This past summer, the network began distributing face shields, cloth masks, door handle adapters and reception desk plastic shields to schools and restaurants grappling with ways to reopen safely. But Margalus and several faculty members and graduate students first got the ball rolling back in March when it became apparent that frontline health care workers didn’t have enough PPE when the first wave of COVID-19 cases swept into Illinois.

Margalus grew the network with the help of friends in the maker community, among them public school teachers, librarians and museum professionals. Jeff Solin, a teacher at Lane Tech High School in Chicago, designed a way to laser-cut a face shield and its strap components from a single piece of PETG plastic, a method faster than 3D printing.

Industry partners stepped forward to donate labor and supplies. Triangle Dies and Supplies die-cut face shields for free at a production rate of 2,000 per hour. Robert Bosch Tool Corporation churned out more than 30,000 face shields at its Dremel DigiLab subsidiary. Coca-Cola donated three tons of plastic. School of Nursing faculty and staff, bicycle couriers, medical students and military veterans helped distribute the finished products that filled a critical shortage last spring before the U.S. Food and Drug Administration eased requirements that had hindered large-scale production.

“It’s been heartening to see that the dysfunction at the top doesn’t destroy the resiliency of the people on the ground,” says Margalus.

In addition to supporting school workers, the Illinois PPE Network has lately turned its attention to disseminating educational guides for using PPE effectively. “It has always been our preference at makerspaces to do work that has tangible, immediate benefits to people,” says Margalus.

“In this case, it’s helped keep people healthy and alive. I’m very proud of DePaul, because more than any other university, we have walked the walk.”
Meet Would-Be Hot Topic Influencer Vera Drew

Digital cinema alumna makes her own kind of magic in L.A.

What does an Emmy-nominated, transgender director/writer/editor shut inside her Los Angeles home during a pandemic do to keep herself sane? She launches a YouTube series, “Hot Topics with Vera Drew,” by which she hopes to become a brand ambassador for clothing and accessories retailer Hot Topic through her hilarious and personal reflections on her life.

Drew, a 2011 graduate of CDM’s digital cinema program, has come a long way from her beginnings in suburban Mokena, Ill. In addition to her 2018 Emmy nomination for her work on Sacha Baron Cohen’s “Who Is America,” she helped launch Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim’s streaming TV network Channel 5, for which she wrote and directed four comedy series: “I Love David,” “Tim and Eric Quiz,” “Scum” and “Our Bodies.” She also has contributed her talents to YouTube channels HLPtv and Everything Is Terrible.

Her professional journey began at DePaul. “The main reason I wanted to go to DePaul was because the digital cinema program was just starting. To me it was the way the industry was clearly heading. And I just really, really loved Chicago. I was always in the city because I was doing comedy there when I was a kid.

“It’s actually really hard for me to imagine what my life would have been like had I gone somewhere else. I was a mess when I was a senior at college because I was still so deeply in the closet and miserable. Thankfully, Dan Klein, who was one of the people in charge of the L.A. program, and Shayna Connelly, Alexander Stewart and Josh Jones were my guardian angels. They encouraged me to get my stuff together and apply to the L.A. program. I was able to finish up school in the program.”

Now that COVID-19 has shut down most productions, Drew says, “It’s a scary time to be working in TV, but it’s given me a tremendous opportunity to focus on getting pitches together and work on labor-intensive projects that I otherwise wouldn’t be able to do if I was regularly employed.”

“Hot Topics” is one of those projects. The project Drew is most excited about is an all-new feature film that uses footage from Todd Phillips’ “Joker” and other films.

“When I was in college, I was trying to be an experimental filmmaker focusing on sound footage editing,” she says. In doing a re-edit of “Joker” for fun, Drew noticed that “there were a lot of cool themes I could play with that relate to what it’s like growing up being a comedy nerd and a trans woman working in comedy, and the isolation that comes with that.”
A few months after the COVID-19 pandemic spread to Chicago, it became clear from records collected at testing sites that Black and Latinx residents represented a disproportionately higher percentage of cases than the city’s other racial populations.

“But there might be some neighborhoods hit more than others in terms of their racial distribution,” says Daniela Stan Raicu, associate provost for research and co-director of the Medical Informatics Lab, which is affiliated with the DePaul Center for Data Science. “So our project is about helping the city distribute resources to the communities that need them the most.”

The project is a collaboration between DePaul and the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) to fill in missing racial data in the city’s COVID-19 case surveillance system to facilitate a more granularly informed response.

Last May, Nikhil Prachand, CDPH’s director of epidemiology, reached out for help through Professor Fernando De Maio, who specializes in medical sociology and social epidemiology. De Maio is part of the DePaul project team that includes Raicu; fellow School of Computing (SoC) faculty members Jacob Furst and Ilyas Ustun; C. Scott Smith, a geographer, urban planner and assistant director of DePaul’s Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development; and SoC graduate students Hao Wu and Yiyang Wang.

At testing sites, patients are asked to provide their first and last name, address and race. However, nearly half of the 256,483 records CDPH collected through June 18 were missing the race detail. The DePaul team set about trying to fill in the blanks.

The team used an algorithm that formulates the likelihood of surnames and geocoded home addresses sourced from U.S. Census Bureau data sets to impute a particular race. By July, the team had secured all but 11% of the missing information within an 81% accuracy metric.

The racial mix before and after filling the missing values increased from 17.02% to 29.29% for Black patients, 16.28% to 28.36% for Latinx patients and 13.87% to 24.17% for white patients. Those results and others will be used by CDPH as part of a larger effort to learn how many patients tested actually had COVID-19 and how many died.

“We did find the Latinx and Black groups have more cases,” says Wu, a DePaul Center for Data Science graduate assistant, who ran the city’s stats through the model. He presented findings to the team during weekly online meetings. “I’m grateful for this opportunity to contribute to a real-world project in the city I live in,” he says.

Using the algorithm as a basis, Ustun has designed an application that lets CDPH researchers quickly receive calculated racial information when they enter surnames and zip codes. The team hopes to build other factors into the app, such as occupation, to improve its COVID-19 predictive modeling.

“As more data become available, we can expand the tool,” says Raicu. “And if we can make it work for Chicago, it could also be used by other cities.”
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