

# \$16 Million Project Retreat with a View

by Sam Mitchell

As the Great Hotel War of 1985 cranks up at the beach, with the Dream Inn and Hilton battling each other in the local press for the coveted prize of building permits, a development firm is quietly pressing full steam ahead on construction of what promises to be one of the most exclusive conference centers on the West Coast: Chaminade.

Anyone who regularly drives Highway One between Santa Cruz and Capitola is probably somewhat familiar with Chaminade. It's that mysterious building nestled on a eucalyptus-covered bluff behind Dominican Hospital, looking like a cross between a castle and a monastery. The type of place James Dean would've picked to hold a knife fight in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Actually, Chaminade is not quite so filled with mystery and romance as some die-hard romantic Santa Cruzans would like to believe. The 55-year-old building was originally a Catholic boys' high school operated by a small monastic order called the Marianists, a teaching order with St. Mary as their patron saint. The building gets its name from Father William Joseph Chaminade, the founder of the Marianists.

In the 1940s, the building became a Catholic novitiate, a "training ground" for novices in the world of monastic life. As Santa Cruz crept ever-closer to the wooded hilltop location, Chaminade became a religious retreat for a few years in the 1970s, passing its days silently and largely unnoticed by the humming city below.

But in 1977, the winds of change began blowing

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RECONSTRUCTION is underway on the old Chaminade High School building in the hills above Dominican Hospital to convert it into a first-class executive retreat site.

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## COVER STORY

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through the cracked stucco and rotting timbers of the once-proud building. A development firm with ties to the conference center industry bought the 80 acres of forests and meadows and began making plans for turning the once-remote Catholic boys' school into a state-of-the-art executive conference center, complete with all the trappings of the Computer Age.

Luckily for the decaying building and those who didn't want to see it destroyed, Chaminade was going to have a first-class seat on the ride to the modern corporate age. Indeed, the old school was the star of the show.

It took seven years of hard work and careful planning, but ground was finally broken on the \$16-million project last May amid virtually no fanfare. *The News* set out last week to check out the progress on the building, and we

were no less than astounded at what we found.

From Highway One, it's obvious to careful observers that Chaminade is receiving some kind of well-deserved facelift. What isn't so obvious from the highway is what is literally going on behind the scenes. To find that, we had to wind our way down a muddy dirt road that would've seemed more at home in the High Sierra, dodging potholes and rabbits and an occasional 18-wheeler.

Just when we had decided that we'd arrived in downtown Nowhereville, we came upon a scene no less jarring than the one that hit Richard Dreyfuss in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* when he saw the spaceship landing pad in the middle of the wilds of Wyoming. A virtual army of mud-splattered construction workers and road machinery was busy turning the 10-acre heart of the 80-acre

grounds into what looked like some kind of planned community of luxury condos. After a quarter-mile trudge through the mud and construction scraps we finally arrived at the office of the project's mastermind, Chaminade general manager Larry Swanson.

Visibly pleased with all the activity buzzing around him, Swanson explained to *The News* what he hopes to see by next April on the now-muddy site: nothing less than one of the finest conference centers for big brass executives that has ever graced the shores of the Pacific.

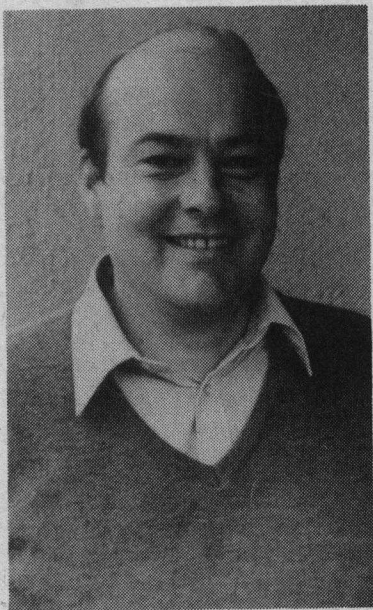
"What we're trying to do here is have a meeting facility designed exclusively for groups," said Swanson. By this, Swanson means every phase of the multi-million dollar project will be geared to serving the needs of executives in what he termed "America's foremost corporate campus." Unlike the Dream Inn and the proposed Hilton, there will be no facilities at Chaminade for tourists; and unlike the proposed Wingspread development, there will be absolutely no residential development.

The plans for the former schoolhouse are impressive by any measure. There will be 156 guest rooms, complete with personal computer hookups so guests can communicate with the main building or their home base hundreds of miles away.

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The main building (which will be 40,000 square feet when reconstruction is finished) will contain 10 meeting rooms, a 250-seat dining room, bar and gameroom, and offices. All of the rooms will be "connected" by



**CHAMINADE General Manager  
Larry Swanson**

close-circuit television so everyone can come together in "one" place; furthermore, the entire building will be "connected" to the whole world via a satellite-controlled teleconferencing system.

When visitors aren't fretting over some problem of world importance in the conference rooms (or daydreaming out the window which looks out over the city below), they can take advantage of the expansive array of recreation facilities: an executive health club (built in the original school gym), heated swimming pool, four tennis courts, and an expansive system of hiking trails that wind through the 80 acres of woods and fields.

A staff of 120 will be on hand to

help with every imaginable problem from operating the 21 slide projectors to translating foreign languages to making appointments for executives at the Pebble Beach Golf Club (doubtlessly one of the staff's major duties).

Obviously, all this pampering won't come cheap: rates will range from \$130 to \$185 per person per day, so a three-day conference with 100 guests may cost a business \$50,000. However, Swanson stressed that the price covers everything from meals to tennis rackets, and there will be no hidden costs.

As much as Swanson wants to cater to the "big brass" crowd, he insisted that Chaminade will always be a small, personal *conference* center (250 guests maximum) as opposed to a much larger, less personal, *convention* center. Swanson stressed that one of the major goals of Chaminade will be to preserve the special qualities that makes his property such a prized place. To preserve the charm of the old building and quiet grounds, all cars will be parked away from the conference center and guests will be shuttled in silent electric golf carts.

"What we've attempted to do is work with the environment here," said Swanson, who added that the vast majority of the site will remain in its natural state. "We want to take advantage of the natural beauty of the site. Rather than building some type of high-rise, we wanted to cluster the buildings into the landscape. I think this is one of the most beautiful places in the Monterey Bay Area.

"We want to have a first-class facility," said Swanson. "We don't want to lose what we have by increasing the number of guests. We don't want to ruin what we've got here — alot of space, and a lot of exclusiveness."