Cool Jobs
ON CAMPUS

By Ellen N. Woods
Photos by Ed Pfuller

It takes more than a world-class faculty to keep Catholic University running. It takes the technician who tunes the pianos, the craftsman who makes furniture using a 3D printer, the keeper of rare books, the landscaper who plans the spring annuals, and the lab manager who stores chemicals safely. It takes more than 950 staff members to open Catholic University every day. Here is a look at just a few of the coolest jobs on campus.

Hitting the Right Note

Tom Wright
Piano Technician
Benjamin T. Rome School of Music

There is a piano in nearly every room of the Benjamin T. Rome School of Music. And it’s Tom Wright’s job to care for — and about — each one of them.

The school has 75 pianos, and each one needs to be tuned a minimum of once every semester. When he is not tuning, he is maintaining, repairing, and rebuilding them. With a band saw, a planer, a belt sander, and a drill press, his work space looks like a typical woodworking shop — except for the grand piano in the middle of the room. Its lid is up against one wall, its strings are removed, and the keyboard assembly is resting on a shelf. Over the open piano, a hydraulic hoist stands ready to lift the 300-pound cast iron plate, the piece of the piano that holds the tension of the strings.

“The piano is 27 years old and it wasn’t holding a tune anymore. It made sense to invest the time into rebuilding it,” says Wright. So he put upward of 100 hours into the project over the summer.

The reward, he says, will be seeing it return to the Ward Recital Hall. “It is a joy to be able to contribute to the quality of life of anyone performing on or listening to the pianos at CUA. I see my job as one of service to God by facilitating beautiful music.”

Wright enjoys playing piano, but learned early on that the competitive environment was not for him. “It was clear that working on a piano is a better fit for me. I love the beauty and the sound of a piano and I’ve found that playing a support role is just as rewarding to me as being the person out front performing.” In fact, being a good technician, he says, “is the kind of work that, when done best, often goes unnoticed.”

In August, Wright, along with Dean Grayson Wagstaff and other music faculty members, made a trip to the Steinway & Sons factory and showroom in New York City. The group picked out a new concert grand piano for the school that Wright calls a “very special instrument, the kind you would expect to find at a music school with world-class faculty and exceptionally talented students.” (See story, page 7.)

To a man with a passion for pianos, Wright said visiting both the factory and the showroom was “like being a kid in a candy shop.”
Designing with Hands and Machines

Ryan McKibbin
Director, Fabrications Lab
School of Architecture and Planning

When Catholic University celebrated its 125th anniversary last year with the Cardinal Service Commitment — a major campaign to complete 125,000 hours of service — Ryan McKibbin was asked to design and sculpt a huge wooden “thermometer” so the University community could gauge its progress in meeting the service goal.

“It was an awesome opportunity,” says McKibbin, who made his creation in the School of Architecture and Planning’s Fabrications Lab using a mix of traditional and digital techniques. McKibbin, a sculptor and furniture maker, came to Catholic University in 2007 fresh out of college to become director of the lab.

“The space and the equipment we have here is pretty darn nice. It’s unique to find a shop like this in an urban architecture school. Most just don’t have the room for a facility like this,” says McKibbin.

The lab includes a 1,000-square-foot woodshop filled with furniture-grade fabrication equipment, a cold metal working shop, a three-axis CNC router, two laser cutters, a powder-based 3D printer, and a recently renovated 200-square-foot finishing room.

When he first came to CUA, McKibbin said the computer-aided aspect to design was new to him. But he quickly learned and embraced the technology. “We are very lucky here in the architecture and planning school. Students gain a proficiency in both the traditional and the computer-assisted techniques. Using the digital equipment is quicker and more precise than working within the limits of your own dexterity. But you get more feedback from working with your hands and you can stop and correct and change things. We have it all here and it really is the best way to learn.”

In addition to supervising students in the lab, he lectures in the school. This summer he taught Topics in Construction and Environmental in which his six students prototyped furniture ideas for Team Capitol d.c.’s winning entry in the 2013 Solar Decathlon, a U.S. Department of Energy competition to build a “net-zero” house, which generates more energy than it draws from the electrical grid. The team was led by CUA architecture students.

Preserving Ancient Language

Monica Blanchard
Curator, Semitics/Institute of Christian Oriental Research Library

The Semitics/Institute of Christian Oriental Research (ICOR) Library contains some 50,000 books and journals as well as antiquities and photographic and archival materials. As a resource for the study of early Christianity in the Near East, it attracts scholars from around the world. Curator Monica Blanchard has looked after the collection for nearly 30 years and has a fondness for each piece in the library.

“T is is not your typical rare books operation,” says Blanchard. “The faculty and students teach, study, and share office and classroom space amid the collections. The rooms are filled with sounds of ancient languages. In one room you’ll hear students reading passages from the Hebrew Bible while around the corner, the rhythms of a Coptic sermon compete for attention with Akkadian legal texts and Arabic grammar drills.” Blanchard teaches introductory levels of Syriac and Classical Armenian.

Blanchard is working to make the library collections accessible in digital form. On her desk are Ge’ez and Amharic manuscripts to be checked against digital images made during the summer — a final quality assurance review before making the materials available on the Internet. She likes to work with University volunteers. “Digitization and preservation initiatives can be opportunities to reach out to the CUA community — to teach interested students, staff, and faculty new skills and to give them opportunities to work with the library materials,” says Blanchard. She mentions two examples, a recent papyrus conservation project and a summer digital imaging project on Syriac and Coptic printed books. The success of these projects was due in large part to the work of volunteers.
Cultivating a Great Outdoors

Chris Vetick
Assistant Director
Facilities Maintenance and Operations

If you ask Chris Vetick to name his favorite spot on the grounds of Catholic University, you are likely to get a long answer. “In early spring, I love the cherry trees and pansies on the Pryzbyla Plaza between Shahan and McGivney halls, where you can look out across the wide open green lawn of the University Mall to the Basilica. In the fall, I love north campus near O’Boyle and Marist halls. It’s quiet, rustic, and full of fall color.”

Despite his plans, says Vetick, Mother Nature often has the last word. “The tulips are timed to be in full bloom on Odyssey Day, but we had a very mild winter last year and they came up weeks ahead of schedule. That’s what’s so great about this campus. There are always beautiful things to find at any given time of year.”

Vetick has spreadsheets in his office that show what is being planted and growing on every acre at any given time. Planning the landscape involves timing with key events. “We want an extra wow factor at graduation, Orientation, Family Weekend, Homecoming and Reunions, and Odyssey Day. There’s nothing better than seeing all the summer flowers providing a captivating and colorful backdrop to graduation day.”

Vetick has worked closely with the chemistry faculty to order chemicals and supplies, to mix solutions, and to prep labs. Some faculty members have unexpected requests. “I was in Walmart the other day buying four packages of hot dogs for a professor who teaches everyday chemistry for non-science majors. The students extracted fat from hot dogs and compared the fat content by brand.”

“In spring 2011, CUA’s 2,000-tree campus was designated a Tree Campus USA by the Arbor Day Foundation. Among the criteria the University had to meet for this designation was excellence in tree management and engagement of students and community in service learning projects. Vetick has worked with the student Green Club and Campus Ministry to plant and harvest a vegetable garden behind Curley Hall for the benefit of local food banks.”

Vetick’s next goal is to see the University designated an arboretum. “That requires documentation of trees and formal community education programs. We are well on our way.”

Ensuring the Right Chemical Reaction

Katrina Sosinsky
Lab Manager
Department of Chemistry

Sometimes during the work day, Katrina Sosinsky wears leather gloves to prevent frostbite. Among her many responsibilities in the chemistry labs at Maloney Hall is making weekly liquid nitrogen transfers and liquid helium transfers. “Helium becomes liquid at about negative 270 degrees Celsius and nitrogen becomes liquid at about negative 200 degrees Celsius. Extreme caution is needed when working with these chemicals,” says Sosinsky.

“Safety is a necessary part of being a scientist,” she adds, and it is one of her biggest priorities as lab manager in the Department of Chemistry. “We have about 150 general chemistry students in a semester and before they even step in a lab, they watch a safety video, we talk about good practices, and they sign a safety agreement.”

Among the rules: Always wear safety goggles and never take a cell phone out while in the lab. “If you have chemicals on your gloves and you touch your cell phone, the chemical gets on your face. I have no problem taking away cell phones,” says Sosinsky, who has a master’s degree in forensic chemistry from The George Washington University.

Vetick also supervises teaching assistants and works closely with the chemistry faculty to order chemicals and supplies, to mix solutions, and to prep labs. Some faculty members have unexpected requests. “I was in Walmart the other day buying four packages of hot dogs for a professor who teaches everyday chemistry for non-science majors. The students extracted fat from hot dogs and compared the fat content by brand.”

“I really enjoy working with the professors to provide an efficient and safe lab experience for their students,” she says.

“Hydrochloric acid and ammonia react explosively, so they cannot be stored together,” she explains. In one lab, where more than 2,000 chemicals are stored, Sosinsky has had the windows blackened. “We have flammable chemicals in there. On a 90-degree day, with the sun beating in, the pressure could build up and you don’t want that to happen.”

Sosinsky has had about 150 general chemistry students in a semester and before they even step in a lab, they watch a safety video, we talk about good practices, and they sign a safety agreement.”