

POPE-A-PALOOZA

Papal rally in Yonkers

By Lizzie Widdicombe
April 21, 2008THE
NEW YORKER

The Woodstock-based events producer Chris Wangro is not a very religious person, but he has always believed that something magical happens when a big crowd gets together. (This is what led him, after stints as a clown and an agitprop street performer, to begin staging concerts in Central Park—Earth Day, Paul Simon, Lou Reed, Sonic Youth, David Byrne.) So, Wangro said last week, he felt at ease when the Office of the Papal Visit hired him to plan a youth rally at St. Joseph's Seminary, in Yonkers, to welcome Pope Benedict XVI. "It's all very similar," he said. "Ultimately, it comes down to creating a community through the show."

It was four days to showtime. The Pope was arriving in Washington, and Wangro, wearing a leather jacket and Lennon-style sunglasses, was zipping around the seminary in a golf cart, attending to logistics. The audience—twenty-five thousand young people, selected by lottery from around the country—would be bused in on Saturday morning, and Wangro had planned a music festival to entertain them while they waited for the Pope. The lineup: Kelly Clarkson and groups called Saint Michael's Warriors, the Messengers of Christ, A Fragile Tomorrow, and Jammin' with Jesus & Friends. Wangro pointed to the stage. "This is purely a rock-and-roll rig," he said. It was left over from a Rolling Stones show, but Wangro had installed new features, including secret exits, extra floor space, and, on the stage, a thirty-foot-high backdrop depicting a rising Christ surrounded by purple and gold sun rays. Backstage, he was setting up a papal greenroom that would impress even the most demanding diva: fresh flowers, mirrors, Oriental carpets, a decorative cross selected by the fathers at the seminary, a couch-filled seating area, a "very fancy mobile toilet unit."



Illustration by Tom Bachtell

To assemble it all, Wangro had called in many old collaborators. The pre-Pope scene at St. Joseph's was starting to resemble a roadie reunion: on hand were Ken Viola, a burly man in a Bruins jacket, who had been, for fifteen years, the head of the Grateful Dead's security, and Chris Falciano, who'd handled Paul Simon with Wangro. The catering was being done by a vender out of Florida, another longtime Deadhead. "He's bringing a lot of organic stuff," Wangro said. "Fresh juice smoothies and pure-beef dogs. You've gotta go as healthy as you can for an event like this." Hamburger stands had been set up on a hill near the "Quiet Zone," where priests would be hearing alfresco confessions.

Wangro, making his way toward the stage, was intercepted by Dr. Nicholas DeRobertis, from St. Joseph's Medical Center. DeRobertis wanted to know how Wangro planned to keep the twenty-five thousand youths hydrated. "Remember I told you about last time, when Pope John Paul came?" DeRobertis asked. "Everything in the seminary had been blessed, so they said the water was holy water, and they refused to drink it." Wangro had a solution for this: he had ordered plain Poland Spring water—no special papal labels—and had put an announcement in the m.c.'s script reassuring the crowd that it was not holy.

There was a staff meeting outside Wangro's trailer, which was full of incense smoke. Wangro reminded his crew to wear their official papal-visit shirts for the show: "Please remember that. No Black Sabbath T-shirts." Then he addressed security. Both the police and the Secret Service—who had mapped out their sniper positions—had told him not to worry, but Wangro said that he'd be relying on Viola's guys, who, from their years with the Dead, knew concert protocol. "No matter how good the police are, they're not trained for the things that these people are trained for," he said.

Wangro had to deal with one last thing: organizing a small Seder, which would be held at sunset in the bishops' tent, after the papal entourage had left. Wangro, who calls himself "a good atheist Jew," had included the event out of consideration for the Jewish members of his crew he'd asked to work during Passover. He'd enlisted Father Michael Martine, the procurator of St. Joseph's, to deliver a blessing. Wangro was planning to lead the ceremony himself, which made him feel a little awkward. "The spiritual part—I don't know," he said. "But it's another great ritual." ♦