Tony Salerno ’66 has influenced generations of kids and families through his dazzlingly creative music, videos and book projects, which include Music Machine and Bibleman. Albums he produced have sold millions of copies, earned multiple Grammy nominations and re-defined kids Christian entertainment. Today, Salerno continues to create projects that, with the same sparkling creativity, teach kids to have good character.

“Part of my goal in life is to see revival come to our country,” says Salerno. “The things we’re doing are tools to get people to the Lord.” Born to Italian immigrants, Salerno spent much of his childhood at church, sometimes sleeping under the piano during all-night prayer meetings. He well remembers watching young people pray into the wee hours of the morning.

“I never forgot the dynamic youth group that impressed me as a kid to serve God,” he says.

He soon had a chance to build his own youth group when his family moved to Oregon to help establish a church. The 15-year-old Salerno
grew the youth group from three to 65 kids in less than a year, before moving back to southern California.

At age 20, Salerno devoted his life to the ministry. During a visit to Israel he knelt in what was said to be Jesus’ tomb and “had this tremendous experience with God,” he says. Realizing the sacrifice Jesus had made for him, Salerno committed himself to God’s work.

He returned home and enrolled at Vanguard. It was “the happiest time in my life up to that time. I loved being there,” he says. He worked his way through school, played sports and studied hard. Though he was shy, a friend convinced him to run for student body president, and Salerno won two years in a row. He and soon-to-be-wife Kathy Vawter ’66 ministered together on evangelistic teams.

After graduating, Tony turned down offers from large churches, accepting instead a youth pastor position at a church with a youth group of only four. Within a few years the youth group became the largest in the Assemblies of God in southern California, with 300 kids and a 150-voice youth choir which Tony directed.

“Our kids really loved God,” he says. “We knew that if they were touched once by Jesus, there’s nothing they would want that would be better than that.”

“I tried to do things that were meaningful, that had purpose. If we want revival, first we have to break up the hardened ground. The way we’re doing that is going in [to schools] and talking about character.”
The Jesus movement was just beginning, and Tony began ministering to street youths who were strung out on drugs. He opened a coffee house in a little building in the church parking lot and dozens of street kids were saved. Local Christian artists like Love Song and Andrae Crouch came to perform. In 1972, Salerno founded Agape Force and modeled it after the Salvation Army, to train young believers for ministry and service. Agape Force grew in size and scope along with the Jesus movement and soon moved to Tyler, Texas, where hundreds of people lived and trained on its campus.

Salerno continued to use music and other media to reach young people, and soon he felt inspired to put together an album and stage production called *Music Machine*. “I was sitting there when the Lord dropped in my heart the whole *Music Machine* idea,” he says. “God gave me the title and told me how to do it.”

Christian record labels initially passed on the idea, and some laughed when Salerno said he believed it would sell a million copies. Eventually, fledgling Sparrow Records put out *Music Machine* on its Birdwing label, and the album went on to sell more than 1 million copies worldwide. Salerno’s second album with Sparrow, *Bullfrogs and Butterflies*, featured songs and narration by former folk singer Barry McGuire, who had scored an earlier pop hit with “Eve of Destruction” and had been influenced by Tony’s ministry. *Bullfrogs and Butterflies* sold more than 900,000 copies. The albums were nominated for eight Grammys and won four Dove awards and two Billboard Music awards.

Salerno went on to make two dozen albums with Sparrow, including *Nathaniel the Grublet* and *Sir Oliver’s Song*. His work redefined kids Christian music. “My talent is to come with the idea,” Salerno says. “I’d have other people write the songs. It was a team effort. One thing I wanted was quality. Everything God does is excellent. We hired all live musicians — the best of the best. I think God helped us to write melodies. We didn’t treat it as a kids album where you talk down to the kids. We made it for everyone because there’s a kid in all of us.”

Salerno had also put together a group called Silverwind whose albums sold widely in the Christian market. But as the Jesus movement wound down in the early ’80s, the Salernos realized they were spread too thin with the 26 ministries at their training center in Texas. They decided to pare back to their core calling: creating media that would influence kids for Christ. Soon they were invited to work with Worlds of Wonder, makers of the hugely successful Teddy Ruxpin talking bear. Salerno created a series of toys, books and recordings for the company, and also a children’s cartoon, *Little Clowns of Happytown*, which aired on ABC for a season. In those years he also worked with Nest Entertainment.

In the mid-1990s, Salerno created a character called Bibleman, hiring former Eight is Enough star Willie Aames to play the lead role in the video series. A young girl named Calli Dye ’05, now a VU alum, acted in the first Bibleman videos. “The idea was that the word of God transforms your life, and the hero of the series was the word of God,” Salerno says. “I meet kids all the time who just love Bibleman.”

Bibleman remains one of the top Christian kids properties, with a live touring show, video series, books and action figures. In the 1990s, Salerno also created a book and CD called *Character Classics* which put character-building lyrics to classical music. It won a
“Vanguard offers a wonderful platform for young adults to identify what is true and important in life and to give them a sense of direction. If we didn’t have Vanguard, where would these people go? ... If we don’t support it, who will?”

In 1997 the Quisenberrys moved to the San Francisco Bay Area where Rick now works for Charles Schwab, helping write the software that makes Schwab.com function smoothly for Internet users. Margaret continues to work as a technical writer. The couple has donated regularly to Vanguard for a number of years. As PMC members, they are among VU’s most generous philanthropic donors, whose generosity sets an example for others. Each year, PMC members are invited to a special luncheon with VU president Murray Dempster, are offered VIP seating at Christmas Fantasia and are acknowledged in the annual report publication of vanguard magazine. People may join the PMC at a variety of levels, from the Medallion level — $1,000 to $2,499 annually — to the Platinum level of $25,000 or more, and all levels in between. Gifts to the President’s Medallion Club ensure that future business leaders, doctors, pastors, teachers, athletes and social workers are all offered an education marked by excellence and spiritual vitality regardless of background or need.

Margaret says they began giving as they reflected on how important VU had been in their life development. “You start appreciating things, re-assessing and realizing the value of the Christian education we got there,” she says.

Rick says one of his goals is to be “an encouragement to students who don’t have scholarships or any other way [to help pay for school].” He also wants to encourage the kind of growth that took place in his own life while there. Recently, he returned to his original field of study, psychology, and enrolled in graduate school to earn his master’s degree in psychology, with encouragement and recommendations from Vince Gil and other VU professors. He is considering pursuing counseling as a second career. The Quisenberrys also have a 21-year-old son.

“We are so grateful for Rick and Margaret’s generosity, and the generosity of all Vanguard PMC members,” says President Murray Dempster. “PMC members are a vital part of our community because they make it possible for Vanguard to continue to offer students the kind of personalized, high-quality education that equips them to go out and change the world for the better.”

Rick agrees.

“Vanguard offers a wonderful platform for young adults to identify what is true and important in life and to give them a sense of direction,” Rick says. “If we didn’t have Vanguard, where would these people go? How would we train people to be Christian leaders? ... Vanguard is a great place to develop those characteristics in young people. If we don’t support it, who will?”

To join Rick and Margaret as members of this leadership group of donors, please call 714.556.3610 x2026 or visit www.vanguard.edu PMC.