

Film star joins in Scientology verdict protest

By HOLLY DANKS
of The Oregonian staff

Movie star John Travolta, looking tired, tousled and in need of a shave, arrived shortly after midnight Monday in Portland to defend the Church of Scientology and back the growing protest of the \$39 million judgment handed down against it last week by a Multnomah County jury.

"It's simple," Travolta said after walking into a small conference room on the third floor of the Hilton Hotel and taking a long drink from the water glass placed in front of him. "I've been a Scientologist for 10 years now — I receive counseling and I give counseling — and I just feel that it's time to stand up for what one believes."

About 500 Scientologists, including other film, television and recording artists, had arrived by Sunday night in Portland to demonstrate against what is thought to be the largest punitive damage award in Oregon history. Friday, a jury declared that former Scientology member Julie Christofferson Titchbourne, 27, should receive \$39 million in her lawsuit that claimed the church fraudulently misrepresented the benefits of membership.

Monday morning, some 1,000 Scientologists and supporters gathered in downtown Portland in the third day of public demonstrations against the verdict. Several hundred circled the Multnomah County Courthouse chanting and singing, while across the street in Lownsdale Square others took breaks from picketing to sip coffee provided by an improvised canteen, to rest on park benches or to catch a quick nap on quilts, blankets and sleeping bags spread out on the grass. Portland police reported no problems with the crowd, which they described as orderly and cooperative.

The Rev. John Carmichael, president of the church in Portland, said thousands of Scientologists were continuing to arrive in the city to protest the jury decision, which he said they believe is an attack on religious freedom.

He said Scientologists were being housed by church members and in area

hotels and motels.

The church Sunday unsuccessfully sought to have Portland rescind its ban on camping within city limits in order to accommodate a "tent city" in Tom McCall Waterfront Park, according to Jack McGowan, press aide to Mayor Bud Clark. "We're not going to go along with that because it's not an emergency and not a charitable event," McGowan said. "It's a public demonstration, and it would set a precedent."

Jazz musician Chick Corea, a Scientologist, was scheduled to arrive Monday in Portland for a press conference protesting the verdict. He also was scheduled to attend a concert and rally in Lownsdale Square and to present a "Concert for Religious Freedom" at 8 p.m. in Tom McCall Waterfront Park.

Travolta, a private pilot, flew to Portland from Los Angeles in his own jet and left about 2 a.m. Monday, directly following his 10-minute press conference and a quick huddle with church leaders and other Scientology celebrities at the Hilton. Prior commitments to the filming of his new movie, "Perfect," dictated the timing of his short stay, a visit he said he made on his own initiative and at his own expense.

Having gained a reputation as a box office sex symbol for films such as "Saturday Night Fever," "Urban Cowboy" and "Stayin' Alive," the 31-year-old Travolta said it had crossed his mind that it could hurt his career to come out strong as a Scientologist.

"For something that you feel saved your life a couple of times, you take the chance," Travolta said, declining to elaborate his specific beliefs or experiences with Scientology.

But speaking in very subdued, reverent tones that seemed tinged with disbelief and sadness, Travolta said that Scientology, "in a world where the leaders are trying to fry each other, at a minimum, is preaching sanity."

"I don't see why something like this, with such good intentions, is being persecuted," he said.

When asked to respond to the allegation that Scientology is a cult, Tra-

volta elicited laughter and applause from the church members in the room by retorting: "If I was in a better mood, I'd laugh."

Travolta said he would never foist his beliefs on his fans, but he said he

wanted to take advantage of his new movie and current publicity splash to come out against the jury's decision in the lawsuit. "Maybe I can help," he said.

He said he feared the Portland lawsuit could have lasting repercussions for all Scientologists. "If this lawsuit is lost, even I, as a counselor, could be liable," Travolta said. "It concerns me for myself, my family and other Scientologists."



LENDING SUPPORT — John Travolta prepares to take a sip of water early Monday at a press confer-

ence. The actor was in Portland to back fellow Scientologists protesting a verdict against the church.

The Oregonian/JOEL DAVIS