Young animators hone creativity

By Michelle Fisher, *Special to the News*
Saturday, November 8, 2008

A snowman saddens after losing at an arcade game, but cheers up when he ventures outside and loses his head, literally. A fuzzy white seal frolics with a brown otter and jumps through a hoop. A green one-eyed monster looks both ways before crossing the street but gets hit by a red truck; his eye rolls off, enlarges, opens — and out steps a smaller version of himself.

These characters might not be ready for the big screen, but they are starring in a DVD showcasing the work of young participants from Palos Verdes on the Net's summer computer-animation program. The faces of 28 students smile from the DVD cover, reflecting that kids are No. 1 at the Rancho Palos Verdes-based computer center affectionately called "PVNET."

Director Ted Vegvari, who set up shop in 1996, recently expanded into a second building near RPV City Hall that serves as a classroom for local kids drawn to the computer technology field. Computer animation is just one of several course offerings, including Web design, video editing, technical support, network maintenance and GIS (geographical information systems).

So why did Vegvari invest hundreds of thousands of dollars into a new building, dozens of computers and the latest software to create a first-rate instructional center?

"I wanted to create a center where whatever is new is accessible to the public, and what's up and coming will be made available, to foster interest, encourage the development of computer skills and benefit the community," says Vegvari.

Drawing students far and wide

This past summer, about 28 students, aged 9 to 17, took computer-animation classes, and eight enrolled in the GIS program, according to Vegvari. One student traveled all the way from Idaho to develop her animation skills on the Maya software used by film industry pros. The granddaughter of longtime RPV Councilman John McTaggart, Erin Killilea, 10, had toured the nonprofit center with her parents in 2007, and her whole family was impressed.

"When Ted told me they might not be able to do the summer program this year, I asked him, 'What will it take?'" McTaggart recalls.

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In a show of support, the former city official donated $5,000 to PVNET to help defray the cost of offering summer classes. He says Erin's happiness is enough reward for him.

"Now my granddaughter makes boxes fly across her computer screen — she can shoot fire!" he says with pride. "It's amazing what these kids can do with animation. The way it's taught at PVNET is great, because they get to move along at their own pace to each new level."

McTaggart stresses that no program like this is available locally for young people, like Erin, who hold a deep fascination for movie magic — and want to create it themselves. "She has artistic talent, and anyone with artistic talent and computer knowledge can make it big these days," he says.

Jean Etter, founder of Peninsula High School's internship and work experience program, could not agree more. She handled the recruiting and publicity side of the summer program, inviting kids from all throughout the South Bay.

"I worked on this to let the community know what Ted offers at the center — all the state-of-the-art equipment and software like Maya," she says. "This is what they use in all the films today, so you're coming away with a skill you couldn't get anywhere else. In every movie, there is animation."

The architectural, medical and interior design fields also rely on this new technology, Etter continues. "Learning to be an animator also leads to the gaming industry. This industry is now bigger than Hollywood in terms of the money it makes," she says.

Other high school students studied GIS and IT (information technology) at PVNET this past summer. "They are kind of exploring at the high school level: seeing what is out there, what is of interest to them," Etter says.

McTaggart commends Vegvari for having the "insight" to allow younger kids into his computer classes. "Generally, people would think that it takes some kind of genius to learn these things," he says. "But if someone has basic computer skills and you give them a powerful computer program and training aids, plus great teachers, that's the key to successful outcomes."

Shining examples

Computer-animation instructor Max Kim was drawn to PVNET after watching his older brother shine in the computer field after his extended internship there. (Hoon Kim, a Microsoft analyst, is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at Stanford.) Now Max is majoring in film and media studies at UC Irvine.

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– Oliver Wee
student

The 19-year-old gave his students one-on-one instruction, helping them with the tutorial and then animation development. "They design a small storyline, model it, plan it and color it. Most people don't understand how much work is involved," Max says, explaining that 24 images are required for just one second of animation. "Key frames are the basis of animation."

So how long does it take for the average person to learn animation basics? "Depending on what you're doing, it could take two months to a whole year to learn Maya. With these students, I see a lot of improvement in six weeks because they use it daily," he says.

This summer, which marked Max's second year of teaching at PVNET, proved to be a learning experience for him as well. "The biggest thing I realized is that to teach, I have to adapt to their level and meet their needs — the difficulties they face in learning," Max says.

Oliver Wee, a 16-year-old Torrance High student, admits that it was "challenging" to learn Maya, but it became easier once he grasped the key concepts. Interested in both the film and gaming industries, Oliver plans to take the Animation II course next year.

"They taught me everything I know about animation right now. It was very step-by-step, very easy to follow along. The instructor really helped me with whatever I needed," says Oliver, who created three videos, the longest of which is a 20-second story about a hungry ant. (Math question: How many key frames does that equal?)

Brian Shaw, 15, who attends Peninsula High School, points out that his math background helped with his learning curve. "The program seemed familiar because I could incorporate math into it. It was even better than I expected it to be — it was fun," he says. "I got to create exactly what I wanted. I think my best one is shown on the cover of the DVD."

Brian is referring to his replication of the game character Kirby, whose cooking attempts start a kitchen fire in his short video. The dancing flames look pretty real, but it is the chef's dancing that causes sparks — of laughter. Though much of this work was done on his own, Brian says that he and a friend "helped each other out with certain functions."

"They're learning how to collaborate with each other," Etter says of these and other PVNET students she has known the past decade. "They work together, and this carries over to their other classes. They also develop their creativity, and I've seen tremendous creativity. I think this skill set is going to help them in every area."

For a copy of the PVNET 2008 Animation Program DVD, drop by the center; For information about year-round animation classes, send an e-mail to animation@palosverdes.com or visit www.palosverdes.com/annex