

Imagination, diverse skill set bring creative success for North Smithfield artist

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NORTH SMITHFIELD – Call it an occupational hazard.

In William Culbertson's century-old home on Warren Avenue in North Smithfield, you'll find a complete room dedicated to his collection of Disney paraphernalia, with his favorite characters lined up along shelves, sitting on the television stand, and even painted on the walls.

In the basement, four 3-foot-by-4-foot clay models depict Kermit the Frog and other scenes from Jim Henson's early work.

Four giant handmade puppets sit upon a piano in the living room, while dozens of Culbertson's sculptures grace the home's shelves and ledges.

His back yard, until recently, was filled with Styrofoam and other materials that could come in handy for building a set.

Culbertson has made a lifelong career out of creating and replicating artwork, including both the sculptures and designs that you typically find in parks and town squares, and the

more colorful scenes and characters that make up childhood fantasies.

"As a freelancer, you can't just focus on one area," Culbertson said. "In order to keep success, keep the phone ringing and keep the money flowing, you have to do several things."

This month one of his many visions, a children's program where brightly-colored puppets teach young viewers lessons of kindness and inclusion, was rewarded \$10,000 in start-up funds through Direct Capital's national "Small Biz, Big Success" award competition. Culbertson created the program from scratch, sewing the puppets by hand and making elaborate scenes from recycled materials, and submitted the project through his company Whooplah! LLC.

But "Pollywog Pond," a program focused, in part, on teaching children co-operation and teamwork, is just one of the many ongoing creative and impressive projects on the artist's resumé.

A Maryland native, Culbertson received his master's degree in teaching at Rhode Island School of Design in 1981, and was hired as a sculptor by Hasbro Inc. Soon, he became director of the department, a part of the company's research and design team, and worked creating models for popular toys, from the G.I. Joe action figures to My Little Pony dolls.

The early experience shaped his career.

"We had to make the toys cost-effective," he said. "That's helped me, because I've been able to do a lot of projects a lot cheaper than other artists, just because I know how to cost-reduce things."

In the late 1980s, Culbertson left Hasbro to freelance, and scored work with companies that included Sesame Street and Disney.



VALLEY BREEZE PHOTO BY DAVID WUERTH

WILLIAM CULBERTSON holds "DERB" a character he created for a children's television program. Behind him are the other puppets that he created for the show. Culbertson's media entertainment company, "Whooplah!" recently won a national competition for a video he produced explaining his program.

"There were basically three people doing all of the Sesame Street toys and I was one of them," he said.

He also helped to build many rides at Disney's worldwide network of theme parks. Specializing in licensed characters, the artist prides himself in being able to create any sized figure to the licensor's specifications, from the half-inch figurine to the eight-foot replica.

"That's one of my advantages over other sculptors in this commercial field," he said. "It changes your head around a lot, but the character is the character."

But the replicas, a portfolio including the likes of Barbie, Batman, Superman, Scooby Doo and Mr. Potato Head, to name a few, are only a piece of Culbertson's work. The freelance artist has also pursued public artwork commissions: creating large-scale historical figures, original sculptures and models for public space, typically in concrete or bronze. Anywhere from 200 to 300 artists normally submit designs in competitive bids for such jobs, but here, another of the North Smithfield resident's many talents has helped out: He teaches computer graphics at New England Institute of Technology and can create

computerized simulations of his visions.

"That's blossomed and grown, and I've been doing public art around the world," he said.

Currently, Culbertson is working on what he considers to be the most important project of his life's work: a memorial for Jim Henson to be placed in the famous puppeteer's hometown of Hyattsville, Md.

"He's the one that you try to model yourself after," Culbertson said of the Muppets creator. "He contributed so much to the field."

Culbertson's winning idea for Magruder Park in Hyattsville includes installing concrete replicas of scenes from Henson's first television program, "Sam and Friends" around a flower bed. Kermit and many of his other Muppets pals made their debut appearance during five-minute skits of "Sam and Friends" before the area's nightly news program on WRC-TV.

The roughly four-foot models would look like television screens and would be surrounded by concrete benches in the shape of couches, inscribed with famous Henson quotes. Kermit the Frog's footsteps would wander through the playground, and a wi-fi hotspot would allow visitors to learn about the Henson family, and the Muppets' early beginnings.

While Culbertson says he never got to work with the Muppets founder, he has worked with several of Henson's children, including Heather Henson, a fellow grad-

uate of RISD.

The idea for "Pollywog Pond," a concept that follows much of the Henson tradition, technically began back in Culbertson's college days. He created the first character, a optimistic purple fuzz ball named Derb, whose appearance lands somewhere between a bird and a frog, as part of his thesis project for graduate school. He's continued work on the program on and off over the years, hand-sewing his cast of characters, and filming trailers and teasers for the show.

The pond is "halfway between here and there" and is intended to form a natural, colorful backdrop for the preschool-aged characters' lessons and adventures.

"It's a soft curriculum. It's not ABC 1-2-3, it's how do you have relationships with people," explained Culbertson. "There is an element of teaching kids how to deal with autism and other kids who might be challenged. It's teaching how to be understanding and respectful."

Pollywog characters love music, and for the soundtrack, Culbertson recruited Mount St. Charles Academy music teacher Greg Cooney. Culbertson says he found Cooney after a national search led him right back to northern Rhode Island.

"He's really talented," Culbertson said. "His voice is so clear and beautiful."

The pair collaborated on a series for Rhode Island PBS called "L'il Rhody" in 2005,

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starring puppets Dave, a blue-faced young boy, and Red, a Rhode Island Red rooster. Culbertson described the project as “sort of a test run” for Pollywog Pond, to see if the artists were in over their heads. The series won two Telly awards – a national honor recognizing excellence in video and film.

Culbertson said the \$10,000 Direct Capital award has helped him to create toys and other marketing tools for the

new show, such as plush models of his characters. In two weeks, he’ll pitch the project to companies, including Sprout and Canadian Broadcasting Company, at Kidscreen Summit 2014, the largest children’s television conference in America.

To learn more about Pollywog Pond or watch a trailer of the program, visit pollywogpond.com, or read more about the artist’s other projects at whooplah.com/Whooplah/sculpturelab.html.