

Local brings Hollywood to Apex

by Shawn Daley

09.10.09 - 07:39 pm

For decades New Hill resident John Demers has worked within the Hollywood system of pouring big money into big projects and hoping everything works out in the end.

Now the versatile actor and film producer is looking to turn that system upside down. Rather than starting a project on a grand and expensive scale, he's looking to begin his project on a shoestring budget and gradually build it over time. Demers is the creator and executive producer of a kids' television show, *The Rusty Bucket Kids Cub*, that will begin filming in October in downtown Apex.

He believes the time is right for his new business model because the struggling economy has left many facets of the entertainment industry strapped for cash.

"I look at the economic downturn as opportunity," said Demers. "Most people find new opportunity and new ways to make money in a down economy because everybody is watching carefully how they spend. My industry for so long has focused on A-list talent, A-list sponsors and A-list product placement. A lot of times there is so much emphasis on that there is little emphasis on story.

"We've already taken care of the story. Now what we want to do is what so many other businesses across the country are doing right now, which is changing how they operate, changing how the revenue comes in, and wanting more value for what they spend money on. If you are going to do that you really have to evaluate your business model."

Demers' business model depends on producing the show on a local level. Everyone involved with the show except Los Angeles residents Kevin McDermott (director) and Simon Barron (director/producer) lives within a two-hour drive of Apex.

The set up allows Demers to save money and gives his crew and actors a chance to go home after work every day.

"People get to go to work on the set and then go home and go to bed," said Demers. "Some might be a couple of hours away but they are all going home at night. This industry doesn't traditionally do that. Also, I don't end up with any hotel bills or the expense of feeding people after hours."

The biggest money saver is a business model that is the exact opposite of how Hollywood normally operates. So it didn't come as a surprise to Demers when he received a lot of negative feedback from the West Coast.

"I was kind of running the idea up the flagpole and I heard a lot of, 'It can't work,'" said Demers. "That's because in our industry you make content and it always goes downstream."

For anyone looking to produce a pilot it would cost about \$250,000 to film it and another \$200,000 to convince national distributors the project was worthwhile. The distributor would probably spend \$100,000 to get network officials interested in it.

"At that point a half a million dollars has been spent and (nobody) is sure it will ever get on television," said Demers. "Then the network has to decide if it wants to spend another \$500,000 to promote it. There is a million dollars already."

But with the economy struggling and advertisers holding onto to their money, said Demers, that business model doesn't work anymore.

He is looking to take his locally produced show to local television stations that are also struggling financially. Not only can Demers offer his show at a low rate but he could also offer a percentage of sponsorship revenue.

And Demers is convinced he can find sponsors because the cost to advertise will remain low. "Broadcast television has really suffered because they have lost a lot of the car advertising and real estate revenue," said Demers. "Some stations are dropping some of their (news) shows because they don't have the revenue to support it.

"But they still have a license that says they have to broadcast and put something in those (time slots). They won't have to pay the going rates for my product and I have the resume and pedigree of people who can demonstrate that the product can get delivered."

Those with the most impressive resumes are McDermott and Barron who are working on the project for far less money than they could usually demand.

“They have resumes that say they are \$800, \$900 or even \$1,000 a day guys,” said Demers. “In all fairness, I couldn’t do that. But I’ve worked for them and they have worked for me before.

“It’s the whole concept of coming together, really enjoying it, liking the people you are working with and doing something for a community that appreciates and values you because you are promoting that community.”

Filming is tentatively set to begin Oct. 12 with a premiere target date of mid-February. Each episode will be separated into three “acts.” The first two acts will appear as webisodes on the Internet on Tuesdays and Thursdays with the final act appearing on broadcast television.

The long-term plan also includes merchandising, DVDs, and even a feature film.

The show follows the adventures of youngsters who have the ability to travel back in time and visit with historical figures who are still in their teenage years. The first episode will focus on a 15-year-old Abraham Lincoln.

“We are targeting tweens so the characters, like Lincoln, will be about 15,” said Demers. “We want to show that young people and teenagers get along and have something to say to each other.”

While the show will remain lighthearted there will be a serious attempt to keep the historical aspects accurate.

“We want to stay as true to history as we can,” said Demers. “We want to encourage young people to learn about history. If we really knew history we wouldn’t repeat a lot of the mistakes we make in our world.”