

Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2009

## The peak of good make-believe

### Apex goes Hollywood as backdrop for 'The Rusty Bucket Kids Club'

BY VICKIE JEAN DEHAMER - Staff writer

For the past month, there have been some strange things happening on Salem Street.

Mayor Keith Weatherly was spotted dangling from a cherry picker bucket 20 feet in the air. Triangle Gazette Publisher J.C. Knowles strutted around in a red, white and blue tie, saying he was the mayor. And two local kids insisted they could travel through time on a train to talk to a teenaged Abe Lincoln.

Hollywood has come to Apex. "The Rusty Bucket Kids Club" started filming in downtown shops and other parts of Wake County in October. Created, written and produced by locals, the pilot episode will premiere at the Peak City Film Festival on Nov. 20.



The 55-minute pilot cost \$200,000 to produce, took 55 cast and crew members to create and 17 straight shooting days to be ready in time for the maiden run of the festival, which aims to showcase upwards of 30 family-friendly projects during the weekend before Thanksgiving.

The idea for the show – which chronicles two modern-day kids travelling through time to meet historical figures in their teens – came from an unlikely place, during an even more unlikely time.

Creator John Demers, an Apex resident, B-movie actor and producer, was browsing in The Rusty Bucket, an antique furniture and all-things-Americana store in Apex. He and his

children, Roxanna, 11 and John-Coleman, 8, frequented the store for its quaint merchandise, roaring fire and homemade cookies. He was struck by the shop's simplicity.

"We live in a world of so many veneers," Demers said. "We should start to simplify our lives."

But Demers disappeared for six months from the homey aisles of The Rusty Bucket.

Pam Thorpe, who owns the shop with husband Mack, assumed the show had been put on the back burner.

Demers was suffering from diverticulitis, a dangerous swelling of the abdominal pouch.

"I went from 210 to 139 pounds," the 49-year-old husband and father said. He spent the first half of 2009 trying to get better.

Little did the Thorpes know that he was using his sick time to write the show.

In July, his body went into septic shock, and he had to have surgery. One day before he was rolled into the operating room, he said he had a "blitz" of creativity, finishing the story.

Now, three months later, Demers weighs in at a healthy 175 and is full-steam ahead on the project, which he hopes will get picked up by broadcast television as an ongoing series.

The Rusty Bucket owners have been swept up in his enthusiasm. "He came out like a bullet; he was ready to go," said Pam Thorpe of Demers' ambitious schedule.

From late summer through Thanksgiving, Demers to-do list included assembling a cast and crew, scouting locations, recording a soundtrack, soliciting television stations, building a Web site and convincing investors to put up the money to make the show.

Shooting in Apex beats Los Angeles, Demers said.

In Los Angeles, he said, he'd be paying out the nose to use businesses as locations. In Apex, shop owners were glad to volunteer their properties. "They appreciate the exposure," said Demers, who estimated he saved \$300,000 by shooting in Apex.

Pam Thorpe just thought it was cool. The Thorpes closed The Rusty Bucket for a few days for production. Neighboring businesses, like Peak City Grill, Peak City Pharmacy, All Booked Up and Anna's Pizzeria, followed suit.

"They are so good," she said of Demers' crew, which includes director Kevin McDermott, a noted child acting coach from the West coast who's worked on major films such as "Beethoven," "Kindergarten Cop" and "Free Willy." He came out of retirement to work on the project, and relocated to Apex.

Demers said it was McDermott who convinced him to cast his own children as the leads.

"When executive producers have their children in the show, there's a slight snicker," Demers said. "[But we] came to the conclusion that they were the best people for this show."

Roxanne and John-Coleman, whose characters bear the same first names, have been in local theater productions. Fayetteville actor Scott Taylor plays the young Abe Lincoln. Former WRAL-TV anchor Charlie Gaddy plays Grandpa Peakssen.

The rest of the actors are a bit of a motley crew.

Weatherly and Knowles were asked to give cameos, because their faces are so recognizable.

Knowles was deemed more mayoral than Weatherly, and scored the plum role of the mayor of Peak City, the fictional setting for the show.

He rehearsed his scene for about an hour a week in advance, and he thinks his acting experience in local productions helped. But he's not expecting any Emmys.

"I may get the local bad actor award or something," Knowles said.

Weatherly was told to show up early on a Sunday morning to fulfill his part as a non-speaking, public works employee. "I didn't have my mayor's outfit on," Weatherly said of the cold morning, which he endured for more than an hour in a sweatshirt and hard hat with a real public works employee at his side, who operated the lift. "I'm the one in the white hat," he said.

He remembers feeling like he was really pulling off the non-speaking role of a lifetime – until he noticed his reflection in the glass of a nearby building. "I did need a haircut," he said.

Taylor immersed himself in the role of Lincoln by researching the president's life and taking tips from director McDermott. The homeschooled teen also bears a striking resemblance to the 16th president. He didn't know he'd be auditioning for the role of Lincoln, just that they were looking for a "tall, gangly teenager."

"Everybody tells me how much I look like him," the 17-year-old said. Taylor said he learned some surprising things about a young Lincoln – mostly that he was just like any other teenager. "He wasn't sure if he was going to keep up his education," he said.

Demers was more impressed with Taylor's dramatic chops.

"Scott's performance as Abe Lincoln is one of the finest performances I have ever seen," he said.

Demers is hoping the film festival premiere, which he says has sold more than 400 tickets so far, will spur the project onto broadcast television by February.

He'll be selling about 5,000 DVD copies of the pilot, along with about 1,000 copies of the soundtrack, which features music from local artist G.W. Pierce, who sang the show's theme song.

The last day of shooting was Oct. 28, a sunset shot in New Hill. He plans to close every show, Walton-style, with an exterior shot featuring Roxanna and John-Coleman talking about their next adventure and their parents telling them to go to bed.

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