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They could be giants

*Animation forum
at CCCC
spotlights Plano's
growth in industry*

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The next Jimmy Neutron or Shrek could arise from Collin County's thriving animation community.

Riveted to computer monitors, area animation professionals create feature film characters and ad campaigns. But they do much more.

"It's a growing industry," said Tom Ottinger, one of several professors guiding tomorrow's leading illustrators and graphic gurus. "It's a program we've been growing and enhancing over the last few years."

From his office at Collin County Community College District's Spring Creek campus in Plano, Ottinger keeps tabs on what many consider the area's best kept secret.

"Dallas is sort of an underrated location for creative-services companies," said Ottinger, referring to ani-

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mators and other professionals who create movie characters, 3-D graphics and cutting-edge computer games.

Training the next generation of designers is the school's applied graphics design technology department. With four professors and more than 20 associate instructors, the outgrowth of the school's fine arts division stresses "Monsters Inc." more than Michelangelo.

"I'm not being boastful here, but we've developed a very strong program that is equivalent to those showing up at UT-D (Texas) A&M-Commerce and other schools."

For about \$2,700, the going rate for Collin County residents, students can complete a two-year associate's degree and enter a growing industry.

Spotlighting that growth is this week's "Industry Giants 2005: Frame by Frame, Computer Graphics and Animation Forum," of which the hosts are the district's design technology department and a nonprofit animator's group called A Bunch of Short Guys.

The fourth annual summit is expected to pack the Spring Creek campus. Beginning Friday, animators and students alike will exchange ideas and discuss an industry claiming prominence even outside Hollywood.

While telecom has put North Texas on the map, local animators have gone mostly unnoticed. But many leading animation companies dot Collin and north Dallas County. Among those are Element X Creative, which formed in Plano; DNA Productions in Irving; and Beel FX Animation Studios in Dallas.

Not only is Industry Giants expected to shed light on those firms, it aims to encourage dialogue and intellectual exchange as speakers and observers learn

from one another and through panel discussions.

New this year is an animation master class. Led by Bobby Beck, president and chief executive officer of AnimationMentor.com, the Friday session seeks to open more than a few eyes to the medium's technological possibilities.

With moviegoers pouring billions of dollars into theaters, feature animation clearly is the stuff of corporate giants — even if the medium is ruled by tiny "ants" and bugs, as seen in "A Bug's Life."

It took an insect — or the prospect of creating such animated creatures — to bring David Tart to Texas.

"It's about a kid who learns how to shrink himself down to the size of ants," said Tart, dodging specific details concerning a movie he's helping develop for Warner Bros. Pictures and Playtone Films. Producers anticipate a summer 2006 release for a theatrical feature not related to "Antz," the acclaimed animated film voiced by Woody Allen and other actors.

But the North Texas animation community is no one-off act. It teems with professionals more at home in Plano than Palo Verde, more Irving than Irvine.

"The cost of living is nice, as well as the lifestyle and other opportunities for my family," said Tart.

The California native learned his craft in Berkeley before pouring his soul into Pixar-Disney hits such as "Toy Story," "Monsters Inc.," "Finding Nemo" and other Hollywood blockbusters. His current role as animation director with DNA Productions feeds his creativity while opening his eyes to his adopted state's wealth of talent.

"The Industry Giants event is important because it attracts high-level talent to the area, and that provides an opportunity for

students and professionals to participate in a dialogue with industry leaders," said Tart.

Among those scheduled to speak on Saturday are Chris Williams, a senior character animator with Sony Pictures Imageworks; David Bossert, a four-time Oscar nominee with more than 20 years' experience with Disney Studios; Chris Olivia, whose 3-D animation expertise has enlivened projects such as "Sun City" and "Shark Boy and Lava Girl in 3-D."

But whimsical characters are only the tip of an artist's virtual pen. Equally important to prospective animators are Electronic Data Systems Corp. in Plano, Mary Kay Cosmetics in Dallas and other leading companies, whose in-house meetings and company presentations come alive with animation.

"EDS and 7-Eleven have large art departments with internal corporate-communication creative services departments," said Ottinger. "They work in house, and on business-to-business projects. There's definitely a market for our student skills."

Between 500 and 600 students pursue design technology curriculum at the school, which plans to expand its gaming and graphics animation program next year.

In the meantime, the general public is invited to learn more at this year's Industry Giants. The master class, geared primarily at students and professionals, takes place from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday in room C-104 of the Spring Creek campus, 2800 East Spring Creek Parkway in Plano. The main event runs from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday at the campus' John Anthony Theatre.

Ticket information and other details are available at 972-516-5080 or www.industrygiants.org.

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