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Walt Disney 'imagineer' also promotes 52 virtues

By ANGELA JEFFS

It has taken John Kavelin 40 minutes to drive from his job as director of design and production at Tokyo Disneyland to his home in Minami Azabu. At least 20 minutes faster than if he took the train, he notes, pleased.

John throws together a neat salad before offering a tour of his even neater apartment. Fine pieces of Oriental furniture.

Artifacts gathered on research trips throughout Southeast Asia or from the weekend flea market at Togo Shrine in Tokyo. A collection of art by famed artists and friends. Working drawings of Disney projects. Lots of family photos, including his twin -- and even two ex-fiances!

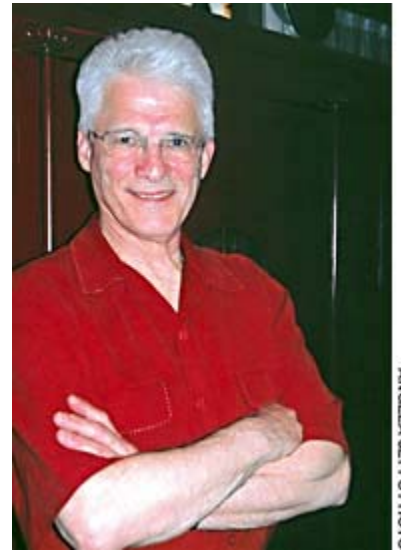
His Scottish mother was a concert pianist at age 13. His father (a dead ringer for Walt Disney himself) gave up a promising career as an opera singer to raise his family. "He went into real estate and bought us a nice house on Long Island on the proceeds of selling two baseball stadiums in one week."

John imagined he would become a doctor. Instead, a wellspring of creative talent was spotted by a young art teacher at high school. Accepted by three universities, John chose to study at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh. "I began as a fine art major but switched to set design." He landed a summer job at Connecticut's Westport Country Playhouse, working on 12 shows, with 12 major stars, in 12 weeks. "I designed my first stage set at age 18."

Choosing security ahead of drama, he taught for eight years, only to be called up. "I was drafted as an army medic, stationed in South Korea -- meeting my need to be a care giver -- and then got reassigned to the entertainment division." Working on what he calls "soldier shows," he served all over the Pacific and, seeing Japan for the first time at age 22, "fell in love."

After service he returned to teaching and designing sets. "At graduate school I learned most from Broadway designer Howard Bay" -- "Music Man," "Man of La Mancha," etc. "His criteria was, if you don't actually need something on the stage, get rid of it. He was a minimalist. I was a maximalist."

With 300 productions tucked under his belt, little wonder John felt tired. "I moved to Hollywood, hawked my portfolio around. After working freelance for four years, I got a call from Disney. I joined the organization in 1982, had a break between 1988-96, and then returned to the fold, eventually coming here in 2001."



ANGELA JEFFS PHOTO

John Kavelin, one of two Disney "imagineers" in Japan, was one of the founders of the Virtues Project, drawing core teachings from the world's sacred texts to help parents raise children and stem rising modern violence.

That break? Tired of L.A. living, he spent six years on Canada's West Coast, assisting his sister, Linda Kavelin Popov, and her husband, Dr. Dan Popov, on The Virtues Project. "Linda's a psychotherapist, organizational consultant and community healer. Dan's a pediatric psychologist and computer scientist. We felt called to try to counteract the rising tide of violence among youth and families."

Scouring sacred texts from the world over, they identified a simple and profound truth: that at the heart of all spiritual traditions lie virtues described as the essence of the human heart and the content of character. "We drew up a guide containing a list of 52 virtues to help parents bring out the best in their kids and themselves."

The team also developed five strategies to help restore the practice of virtues in everyday family life: to speak the language of the virtues, recognize teachable moments, set clear boundaries, honor the spirit and offer spiritual companionship.

The Virtues Project is now a worldwide movement to support character, offering workshops and retreats, training intensives and global mentorship conferences in 40 countries. Virtues Project International is an independent company committed to providing inspirational programs and materials, with no government, corporate, educational or religious agendas.

"With a Virtues group already well established in Sapporo, Hokkaido, we expect interest to soar later this year with the publication in Japanese of 'The Virtues Project Educator's Guide.' "

John says the project is very much about "remembering who we are as noble beings." With the project gathering its own momentum, he now concentrates his energies on another form of remembering: the imagined innocence of childhood.

"Tokyo Disneyland and DisneySea welcome more than 25 million guests a year. I see people's faces as they leave the outside world behind. I see fathers being affectionate, playing with their children. Theme parks cannot provide solutions on a deep level, but if they make people happy and bring out their virtues, if only for a few hours, then I have a more than valid purpose for going to work every day."

He is one of two in charge of "imagineering" at the resort. "We work with Oriental Land's design and technical teams in assisting on new projects, dressing the park for special events and maintaining Disney quality. Anything the guest sees, we're responsible for."

With an office staff of 10, swelled by surges of Disney staffers from the U.S. to work on special projects, John and his staff have been busy overseeing new attractions for the Tokyo Disney Resort. "Buzz Lightyear's Astro-Blasters" is a brand new "dark ride" attraction in Tomorrowland with state-of-the-art technology. A new roller coaster, scheduled to open in 2005 in DisneySea, will offer a hair-raising ride through special effects employing fire and water. "Tower of Terror" (under construction for 2006) is an elevator-style free fall -- the equivalent of 15 floors at a speed faster than falling.

"As a driver from L.A., speed is no problem for me. But to tell the truth, I do have a slight fear of heights. Still, I have to check quality. Riding the rides is part of my job."

VPI online: www.virtuesproject.com

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