



Photos by Ernest A. Brown

North Smithfield's Bill Culbertson operates the puppet Derb, part of the children's show "Pollywog Pond," recently nominated for a regional Emmy award.

# DERB'S THE WORD

## N. Smithfield children's show producer nominated for Emmy

By **STELLA LORENCE**  
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NORTH SMITHFIELD – Derb, Berb, Waddle and Weep started out as a series of syllables Bill Culbertson uttered during a family road trip while his kids argued in the backseat.

Thinking it might be the start of an idea, he asked his wife to write it down and keep it in the glove box. Over a decade later, those four syllables have grown into the four stars

of Culbertson's award-winning children's show "Pollywog Pond," which was nominated this year for a regional Emmy award.

Culbertson was uniquely situated to grow his seed of an idea into a fully produced award-winning show. He studied sculpture at Towson University in Maryland with aspirations to work at Disney. As part of a senior honors thesis project, Culbertson designed micro-environments and used a rudimentary computer and the servo motors

from model airplanes to create animatronic creatures, including the first iteration of "Derb."

"There was this weird bird I made," Culbertson recalled, explaining that the name was supposed to be "Drib," or "bird" spelled backwards, but it came out sounding like "Derb."

An executive at Disney saw his senior project after it attracted some local news coverage and asked for

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# Emmy

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his portfolio. At the time, it was uncommon for artists to have a digital portfolio, so Culbertson was unable to apply for other jobs while Disney executives considered his only physical copy. Disney responded favorably to his work, he said, but they weren't hiring at the time, so he enrolled in a masters program at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Derb the character took a backseat when Culbertson got hired as a toy sculptor at Hasbro working on the company's reintroduction of GI Joe. He stayed with the company for six years, sculpting toy versions of characters from familiar franchises like Peanuts, Smurfs, Sesame Street and My Little Pony.

Culbertson left Hasbro in 1986 to freelance and began working on major licensed characters for Disney, Sesame Street and the Muppets, while returning to Derb and slowly developing the idea for "Pollywog Pond." During that time, Derb evolved from a grey and orange bird with a hat to the pink and purple feathered character in the current show - Culbertson even "reluctantly" gave him arms on the advice of a Hasbro colleague.

One breakthrough came in 2000 when Culbertson was leading a Cub Scout troop in Slatersville.

"I used to be such an introvert," he said. "I couldn't talk to more than four people at the time."

But he realized he had no problem talking and performing for an audience of kids. Using his experience working with the Muppets creators, he taught himself to sew on his mother's old sewing machine and started performing puppet shows for his scout troop.

It was around that time he met Greg Cooney, a musician based in Woonsocket. The two bonded over their Maryland upbringing and they began to collaborate on a puppet series 2002 called



Sandi Culbertson with Dave and Red, a Rhode Island Red Rooster.

"Li'l Rhody" about things for kids to do around the state. The duo pitched it to Rhode Island PBS and got the green light to make as many episodes as possible. Then they found out they wouldn't get any funding to do so.

Culbertson secured enough grants to make four episodes of "Li'l Rhody" before he ran out of money to keep the show afloat, but the drive to produce a kids television show stayed with him.

"To me, it proved we could do this," he said.

Culbertson began teaching computer graphics modeling and sculpting at the New England Institute of Technology while he continued to grow out the concept for Derb and "Pollywog Pond." When one of his students at NEIT suggested Culbertson make his characters into a video game, he couldn't believe he hadn't thought of the idea sooner.

He and his student worked on the game secretly for three months before debuting it at a show in Boston for independent game makers, where it was well-received. When his student left to attend graduate school, Culbertson hired another programmer and continued to build out the game, which was nominated in 2019 for a Kidscreen Award for best original game app.

After the nomination,

"I said it's time to really do this," Culbertson said. He turned a spare room into a small studio and used green screens to put his puppet characters into the video game environments he had created. He produced a handful of short videos with that technique to send to RIPBS, which took about three months before giving him the green light - and some funding this time.

"They basically funded the first three episodes and distributed them," he said.

With a Citizens Bank Small Business Community Champion Award grant, Culbertson built out his studio and got started producing seven "interstitials" about masking during covid in collaboration with the Rhode Island Department of Health. He then set to work on the first three 30-minute episodes of "Pollywog Pond," which debuted on RIPBS last June.

The show centers around the four puppet characters, Derb, Berb, Waddle and

Weep, and focuses on a "soft curriculum" of social-emotional learning. The show also has an underlying theme of environmental conservation. Cooney still contributes the music and Channel Arraial, who also works at Stadium Theater in Woonsocket, performs as the puppet Waddle.

"It's the right quality," Culbertson said. "We're a small team."

Culbertson said the education classes he took as an undergraduate, when he thought he might want to be a teacher, and his wife's experience as a special educator help guide the show's curriculum. His experience working on amusement parks also translated well into designing the "Pollywog Pond" video game because both media use the same principles of guiding the audience through an experience.

"The scripts just flow out so easily," he said. "All one character has to do is start talking."

The show is up for the regional Emmy in the writer-long form content category in this year's Boston-New England award nominations. The winners

will be announced on June 8.

Follow Stella Lorence on Twitter @slorenc3.

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Mid-day: 3-8-1-3	7-21-28-34-35
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## City Council Woonsocket, RI

Application to sell beverages in accordance with Section 3-5-17 of the General Laws of Rhode Island has been made at the office of the City Clerk as follows:

### CLASS BV LIQUOR LICENSE

New Level Studio & Lounge LLC, 8 Main Street. The City Council will hold a public hearing in Harris Hall, 169 Main Street on Monday, May 6, 2024 at 6:00 p.m. at which time and place remonstrates will be heard. All people interested and wishing to be heard are invited to attend.

**Christina Harmon**  
Clerk of the City Council

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