

Former Disney animators create Firefly

Out of the still-warm ashes of Disney's defunct local animation unit comes a new venture: Project Firefly Animation Studios.

Based on Universal Studios Florida's backlot, five former Disney animators-turned-entrepreneurs plan to produce animated features and shorts using both traditional hand-drawn and computergenerated animation.

"The training we got from Disney was the best there is, the best in the world," says Firefly President Dominic Carola. "Now we look forward to using what we learned there to build our own creative success."

Staying local, staying alive

Since the Disney Florida animation division officially closed its doors in early 2004, new companies have sprung up, much like the tech startup flurry in the late 1980s, as large defense companies faced contract slowdowns.

Among Project Firefly's other new competitors on the local front: Legacy Animation, a new animation company launched by former Disney animators in Winter Garden, Fla., and Raven Animation, a subsidiary of Raven Moon Entertainment, which has hired a number of former Disney animators.

"There's a lot of us who worked for Disney who would really like to stay in the area," says Gregg Azzopardi, co-founder and director of animation for Project Firefly. "The quality of life is good here, our kids are happy in their schools, and there seems to be plenty of work."

The decision comes as no surprise to John Fremstad, vice president of technology business development for the Metro Orlando Economic Development Commission.

Fremstad says the beauty of animation and other digital media companies is that they are not businesses dependent on population growth.

Four of the Project Firefly co-founders -- Carola, Azzopardi, Paulo Alvarado and John Webber -- are veteran animators, each with more than 10 years of animating experience. Glen Gagnon, a cofounder and director of business development and finance, brings with him more than 15 years.

Project Firefly already has a number of original projects in development for theatrical and video release, says Gagnon. What those are exactly "can't be discussed just yet," he says with a smile, noting the entertainment industry's reluctance to do much preview on works in progress.

Carola says work on other people's projects will help set the company on firm financial footing before launching into what the five partners are most excited about: producing original animation.

For the time being, the partners say they are content to have the freedom to experiment and develop their own creative style. They expect to put their touch on everything from animated features and children's video games to, perhaps, a line of merchandise related to the company's icon: the firefly.

And even though the company only has the five partners as full-time staff so far, expect to see growth within its first year, says Carola: "Like the firefly, we're just small right now.

"But we believe we can bring a lot of creativity to the audiences out there who want well-told stories with a great animation touch."