

Project Firefly: Animators Aglow With Plans For Future

If Things Pan Out For These Five Disney Vets, The Old Studio's Family Feel Will Live On.
By Roger Moore

In an office suite on the Universal Studios back lot, jammed with sound and video equipment, computers and animation gear, it's pretty clear that the Florida animation studio dream didn't die when Disney pulled the plug on Feature Animation Florida.

The walls of Project Firefly are covered with posters from the films of Disney's Florida glory, films made wholly or in part at Feature Animation Florida -- The Lion King, Mulan, Pocahontas. And the team that launched Project Firefly on the day that Feature Animation Florida closed is hard at work.

"We hit the ground running," says Glen Gagnon, director of business development and finance. The Disney vet managed production schedules, payroll and accounting at Feature Animation Florida.

"The day Disney killed My Peoples [a.k.a. A Few Good Ghosts] in November, we jumped into action," says Dominic Carola, one of the five Florida vets who partnered in Project Firefly. "We were planning on doing this at the end of My Peoples. They moved our timetable up, which was both good and bad. We had to come up with subcontracting work to tide us over.

"But on March 19, the last day of work at the studio, we met with 45 artists and told them what we were going to try and do, what our plans were."

Carola, 37, a lead animator on Lilo & Stitch, worked on everything from John Henry through Brother Bear, and had been with Disney since 1993. He is president of Project Firefly, Central Florida's newest animation studio.

The partners are Paulo Alvarado, 34, director of story development; animator Gregg Azzopardi, 33, director of animation; Gagnon, 39; Carola; and, as creative director, animator John Webber, 33, another 10-year studio vet who had been Carola's roommate in college at Cal Arts, the nation's most famed animation training program.

"You work together for over 10 years and you know everybody's family, you go to their kids' birthday parties," Carola says. "We weren't ready to leave that behind, because we think you can still have that family work atmosphere."

Webber agrees.

"We didn't want to wonder if we could've done it," Webber says. "This was the time."

"We had to kiss the golden handcuffs off," Carola says with a grin.

They have a five-year plan. The idea is to land enough outsourced 2-D and 3-D animation work -- studios have long broken out portions of their animated films for subcontractors -- and do commissioned TV pilots and specials until they can get their original projects up and running.

"We want things that have a virtue to them, that are family-friendly," says Webber, whose favorite movie is *It's a Wonderful Life*.

"We've already turned down work that didn't fit that, our mission statement," Gagnon says.

They expect to have 25 employees by midsummer, and if a big deal they're expecting comes through, maybe 65 by the fall. With roughly half the staff of the Florida studio still in town, "we're trusting that we'll be able to reach out and grab the talent we need."

And if things pan out, maybe that homey, family atmosphere they loved will return.

"The film that was most special to all of us was *Mulan*," says Azzopardi. "We, in the Florida Studio, had something to prove with that one. And we proved it. We have something to prove here again."