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From the Hill to Hollywood

By Evan Ortega
Special to the News

It was after watching a movie as a child that former Rolling Hills resident and Peninsula High School graduate Derrick Auyoung discovered his calling.

"Since I first saw 'Jurassic Park,' I always wanted to be in the computer animation industry," Auyoung said. "I didn't know how; but I just wanted to do it."

The 25-year-old has worked on several major motion pictures, including "Garfield," "The Ring Two" and "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

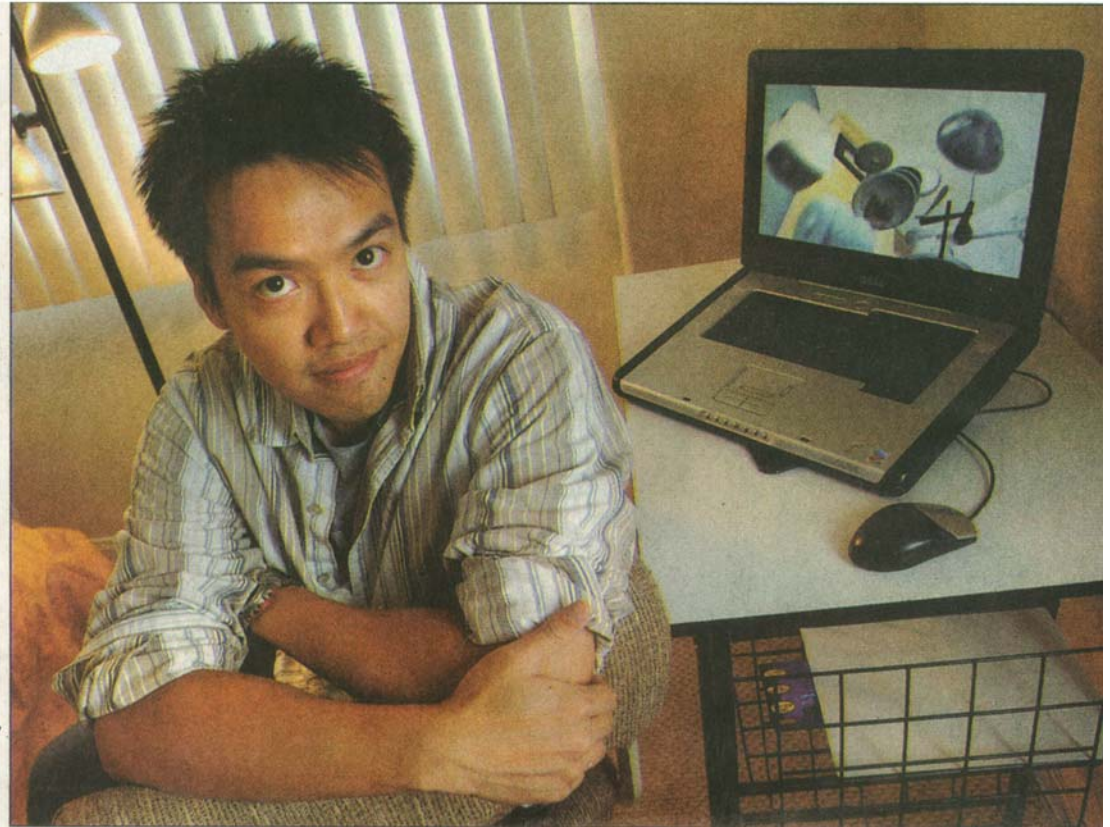
Auyoung's first encounter with animation came when he was an intern at Palos Verdes on the NET, based in Rancho Palos Verdes.

The nonprofit organization provides local residents opportunities to learn about and work with technology on projects benefiting the community.

"I didn't know how I was getting into the industry, so I figured I would start with computers;- Auyoung recalled. "I saw a listing at the career center for PV NET and I thought it would help with my computer and people skills."

PV NET founder Ted Vegvari hired Auyoung as an intern despite his young age because he found the teenager mature enough to work without constant supervision or direction.

"Derrick came here when he was quite young, I think he was around 14. He wanted to find out more about computer internships and what was available," Vegvari said. "We just have cool technology scattered



Tom Underhill, Peninsula News

Computer animator Derrick Auyoung, a former intern at Palos Verdes on the NET and graduate of Peninsula High School, leaves Los Angeles next month for Wellington, New Zealand, where he will work at Weta Digital, a visual effects company co-owned by director Peter Jackson.

throughout our building. People with like interests will find each other and share information, and that's what he did.'

It wasn't long before Auyoung found his way to the animation department.

"He originally came interested in computers and networks and quickly discovered that we had animation," Vegvari said. "I would say it was love at first sight."

In the animation department, Auyoung met Andy Huang, now a 22-year-old USC student studying fine arts and animation. Four years younger than Auyoung, Huang said he looked up to Auyoung, who helped teach him how to use computer animation software.

"At the time he was taking animation classes at UCLA and he passed on some of the things that he learned there to me when we were working together," Huang said.

Their favorite collaboration was an animation short film that Vegvari challenged the interns to produce called "Kitchen Katastrophe," a nine-minute comedy involving kitchen appliances.

"We were really proud because we put a lot of sweat and tears into it. It took a year of weekends and nights after school on the short," Auyoung said. "I remember I was up with Andy at pretty late hours, but we were motivated to finish because it was a pretty fun project to work on."

"Andy and Derrick spearheaded and created a lot of excitement with everyone around them who was excited in animation," Vegvari said. "They became leaders while they were here and inspired others with their own work and enthusiasm."

Huang said Auyoung's technical ability is matched by his work ethic and willingness for collaboration, and that is key in the industry.

"Derrick is amazingly easy to work with. He's extremely patient," Huang said.

Vegvari took Auyoung, Huang and other interns on a trip to Dreamworks Studios, where they presented their concept for "Kitchen Katastrophe" and received feedback.

"The kids incorporated tips from that day and won every award they entered in," Vegvari said. "I think they garnered more than eight awards, and in most of those cases they were competing against adult professionals in the industry."

Auyoung said the experience helped him become confident in computer animation. He was able to draw on his experiences when interviewing for jobs.

"It was a big milestone. It gave me access to software, and I was able to adapt to it pretty quickly once I got to UCLA," Auyoung said. "I didn't have to take as much time to learn the software and could spend more time being creative."

After UCLA, Auyoung was hired by Rhythm and Hues, a visual effects company based in Marina del Rey with hundreds of films to its credit. Auyoung said he is most proud of his work on "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

"It was interesting, because I had a lot of training in animation, as well as computer science, and I was playing around with what I could do. The animation director saw it and wanted it in the movie," Auyoung said. "I took my dad to a screening of 'Narnia' before it was out, and he was proud."

Auyoung is preparing to move to Wellington, New Zealand, where he will work at Weta Digital, a visual effects company co-owned by director Peter Jackson, who directed "Lord of the Rings." During his one-year contract, Auyoung will work on digital effects for movies and hopes to eventually get more involved in animation.

"The field I am in is a little more exclusive because I have skills both in programming and character animation, so I'm going to be the animation technical director at Weta Digital," Auyoung said. "Eventually I would like to become a visual effects supervisor or director."

Auyoung is thankful for the opportunities given to him by PV NET and the support that Vegvari and other adults gave him.

"As long as you are inspired, people like Ted will encourage you to move on, as well. He's a great mentor," Auyoung said. "He helped develop me as a professional and it was great that he encouraged me."