



Reflecting on 30 years of DreamWorks Animation

Chris Sanders, Raymond and Christopher Zibach, Rebecca Huntley, Joel Crawford, and Jason Mayer share their thoughts on the studio's first three decades, how it nurtured and supported their lives and careers, and how that 'family' atmosphere in turn spurred the visionary storytelling and beloved characters created within its walls.

By [Victoria Davis](#) | Thursday, November 14, 2024 at 5:03pm

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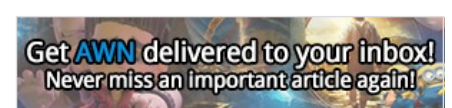
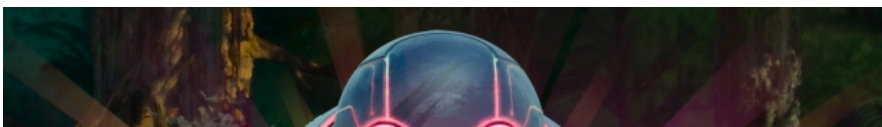
(From L-R) 'The Bad Guys,' 'Puss in Boots: The Last Wish,' 'Kung Fu Panda 4,' and 'The Wild Robot.'

After interviewing six different creatives about **DreamWorks Animation's** 30th Anniversary, hearing stories of the different paths they took to join the studio, and the different productions they've been a part of, each conversation shared a common sentiment: DreamWorks is a family.

Surely, many studios, especially animation studios with their inherently collaborative workforce, see themselves as a family. But DreamWorks, celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, has been a place where filmmakers on the studio's earliest shows have not only raised their own kids but where those once-kids are now working with their parents on current films.

"When a lot of us first started at DreamWorks, it wasn't corporate," remembers Raymond Zibach, who's been a production designer on *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* (2003), the first three *Kung Fu Panda* films (2008-2016), *The Boss Baby: Family Business* (2021) and, most recently, *The Wild Robot* (2024). "I'd just bring in my kids. My daughter would be in full gear selling Girl Scout cookies."

Raymond's son Christopher Zibach, now the art director on DreamWorks' upcoming feature *Dog Man* (releasing January 31, 2025), adds, addressing his dad, "I remember you taking me to DreamWorks before they had a Take Your Kid to Work day. I was barely a teenager – like 10 or 11 – studying your art books and drawing on the Cintiq while you were taking meetings. Everyone was so flexible with me being around and it was inspiring."



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'The Wild Robot' (2024)

Rebecca Huntley, production manager on *How to Train Your Dragon 2* and producer for *The Bad Guys* and *Kung Fu Panda 4*, also raised her kids within the yellow stucco walls of the DreamWorks campus, lined with models from *Shark Tale* (2004) and *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (2002), as well as posters of *Shrek* (2001) and *Puss in Boots* and, of course, shelves of Oscar, Emmy and Annie Awards.

"I had previously been working at Disney and had taken some years off to raise my kids," shares Huntley. "When I was itching to get back into animation, I reached out to DreamWorks. My youngest was in kindergarten and my oldest was in second grade. They were at the perfect age to soak up everything when I brought them to work. They loved coming here to get ice cream and see what I was working on."

Huntley says that one of the special experiences for, as she calls them, "DreamWorks kids," is that they get to see lessons taught to children in many of the studio's films play out in real time. These kids got to see their filmmaker parents practice the resilience, patience, bravery and camaraderie on which many of DreamWorks' films are focused.

"Working on movies is a team effort," says Huntley. "Not every problem has to be solved individually. There's always a solution and way through a problem but it takes people putting their heads together. I think it's been really great for my kids to see that over the years."



'The Bad Guys' (2022)

The familial atmosphere of DreamWorks isn't just a byproduct of studio fostering filmmakers being parents and creatives at the same time. The studio's first years saw it grow as a welcome landing spot for artists coming out of Disney; many of the people joining DreamWorks in the early 2000s already knew each other. Raymond had worked on the *Aladdin* and *The Little Mermaid* series while Huntley had worked with *How To Train Your Dragon* director Chris Sanders on *Hercules* and *Mulan*.

"I had also worked with Dean DeBlois and Bonnie Arnold, who joined me and Chris on *How to Train Your Dragon*," notes Huntley. "It was like a family reunion. It was a wonderful crew to be a part of and the movie really speaks for itself."

How to Train Your Dragon was the 10th highest-grossing film of 2010 and won 10 Annie Awards, including Best Animated Feature. The franchise includes two more films — *How to Train Your Dragon 2* (2014) and *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World* (2019). An animated television series, *DreamWorks Dragons*, was also created and serves as a bridge between the first film and its 2014 sequel (there have been 4 series so far in the franchise). A live-action reboot from Universal Pictures is scheduled to be released on June 13, 2025.



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'How to Train Your Dragon' (2010)

But the success of the first *How to Train Your Dragon* film wasn't just a moment of celebration among old friends for Sanders, who directed with DeBlois. For him, it was a huge step in embracing DreamWorks as his new home after he'd been removed as the director of the Disney animated film *American Dog*, which later became *Bolt* (2008).

"I was in the depths of despair," says Sanders, who had been with Disney since the 90s and had been surfing the large franchise wave of *Lilo & Stitch* (2002) since directing the film in 2002. "I drove out to Joshua Tree and I got a room in a hotel and spent two days crying. My whole world had fallen apart, and I didn't know what I was going to do with myself. That lasted for weeks. Then Jeffrey Katzenberg called me. I picked up the phone and Jeffrey goes, 'So, I hear you're free.'"

Katzenberg co-founded DreamWorks SKG with Steven Spielberg and David Geffen in 1994, with Katzenberg taking primary responsibility over animation operations. He was also credited as producer or executive producer on the DreamWorks animated films *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), *The Road to El Dorado*, *Chicken Run* and *Joseph: King of Dreams* (all in 2000), as well as *Shrek*, *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*, *Shrek 2* and *Shark Tale*.



'The Prince of Egypt' (1998)

Sanders, now known for directing *The Croods* (2013) and the current hit, *The Wild Robot*, also credits Katzenberg with being his "rescuer."

"He offered me a job and I jumped on it," says Sanders. "I never told anybody at DreamWorks, but I would go hide away sometimes and cry because I had such a hard time adjusting to being in a new place after being at Disney for so long. But it became a real home for me. I really wanted to pay back the favor and I felt like I did with *How to Train Your Dragon*."

Sanders recently attended the SCAD Savannah Film Festival with *The Wild Robot* cast. In addition to showcasing a screening of Sanders' new film, SCAD also hosted its own DreamWorks Anniversary celebration events, including a nostalgic screening of *How to Train Your Dragon*. If the screams, shouts, tears and cheers that echoed through the theater as loudly – if not louder – than they did in 2010 was any indication, we'd say Sanders has paid back Katzenberg in full.

"Dean DeBlois and I shared a lot of sensibilities that made that film really wonderful," shares Sanders, who also received the Icon of Animation Award at the festival. "Honestly, I just go to work and do my job with such great people. I try to spend as much time as I can crediting the people around me for what they do. My frustration as a director is that people tend to credit you with things beyond what you did. I should really carry a list of the entire crew with me every time I do a movie so I can reference it in interviews."


Though Sanders certainly doesn't carry the entire weight of productions alone, Joel Crawford, director of *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish* (2022), doesn't pull any punches praising the mentors he's had during his career at DreamWorks, including Sanders.




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'Puss in Boots: The Last Wish' (2022)

"When I first started on *Kung Fu Panda*, Jennifer Yuh Nelson was the head of story, who went on to direct *Kung Fu Panda 2* and *Kung Fu Panda 3*," says Crawford. "She is amazingly talented, so I was fortunate to be mentored by her, as well as Mike Mitchell who I went on to storyboard for on *Shrek Forever After*."

He adds, "I was also always a huge Chris Sanders fan, going back to *Lilo & Stitch*. It was amazing when I stepped into directing my first feature *Croods: A New Age* (2020), Chris came to work on the script with me at the studio and make sure I had a good handle on the characters and on this world he knew well. It was this really wonderful handoff of those characters. And Chris was amazingly helpful when I was directing *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish*."

Crawford's initial attraction to working at DreamWorks began while he was attending California Institute of the Arts.

"When I was in college, I was looking at *Shrek* and thought, 'That's the tone for me,'" he shares. "When I got the opportunity to come over to DreamWorks as a story trainee, I jumped at it. I loved that you can make movies like *The Prince of Egypt* and then turn around and make something like *Shrek*. There isn't a house style to DreamWorks, and that is so fresh and essential for not just the animation industry, but the movie industry as a whole."



'Shrek' (2001)

At the same time Crawford was being wowed by DreamWorks' big green swamp darling, Jason Mayer, DreamWorks' current Head of Effects, was in graduate school at SCAD, having a very similar awakening.

"I had seen *Shrek* at SCAD and was just starting to enter the industry at that point," says Mayer, who also attended SCAD's AnimationFest this year as well as the SCAD Savannah Film Festival's DreamWorks anniversary panel. "I had always been inspired by the 2D stuff coming out of DreamWorks and one of our heads of effects, Stephen Wood, was one of the effects animators on *The Prince of Egypt* and was one of the only people who stuck around in the department when the studio switched to 3D. So, when I was coming in as an artist, he would show me the 2D side to things while we also learned the 3D software and made this Reese's Peanut Butter Cup kind of animation."

But that 2D-3D animation combination was not fully utilized, Mayer notes, until recently, with *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish* and *The Wild Robot*, both of which are 3D films that lean into the painterly, layered sketch style of animation.

"From a technology standpoint, we hit a high watermark with *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World* because we'd incorporated our own in-house technology renderer," says Mayer. "We could get faster feedback, more extensive foliage and more bounces of lighting. It really improved my whole effects department when it came to distortion, fire and water. We've been using that renderer ever since. Now, the next thing we're pushing is implementing more of our 2D roots because a lot of our character animators are really talented 2D animators. Taking the 3D layout with 2D overlays into the final pixel is something *The Bad Guys*, *Puss in Boots* and *The Wild Robot* have done really well."





'How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World' (2019)

While DreamWorks has never had a designated house style regarding their animation and character design, approaching each film as a story with its own unique visual needs, Sanders notes that there was a period of time where DreamWorks unintentionally locked itself into a 3DCG tunnel of which they're now starting to find a way out.

"I believe the future is bright as far as the stylistic variants that we can explore now," says Sanders. "The story we'd always hear is that they can't even find the desks they used to make films like *The Prince of Egypt* and *The Road to El Dorado*. Some of them got snatched up by past animators. It can be done without them, but it's a challenge. Now, we're finding out how to do these different styles with the technology we have."

And DreamWorks is taking risks with more than its films' visuals.

"*The Wild Robot* is an extremely unusual film for any studio," says Sanders. "It's so quiet. And we had to tell the team, 'This isn't going to gel for months longer than this normally takes. With a film like *Puss in Boots* and *The Bad Guys*, there's a lot of dialogue and you really get a sense for the movie before anything is animated. *The Wild Robot* wasn't like that. Ours is much more reliant on animation, which didn't show up for months and months. There was a lot of suspense. But the team did a really good job, and we hope the film reinforces that it is good to take risks."



'The Wild Robot'

Another risk Sanders says he'd like to see the studio take as it heads into its third decade is to advocate for more low budget films.

"Budgets can grow and grow, but the complexity of these films grow with that," says Sanders. "And with that complexity comes more anxiousness from the studio to perform and do well. I've talked about 'buying story freedom with a lower budget,' and I think that is a critical component in these things. Don't forget, *Lilo & Stitch* had a lower budget."

The Zibachs also would like to see more modest projects get tackled at DreamWorks in the name of creative freedom.

"There was a time when the studio had a shorts program," remembers Christopher, referring to the program started in 2017 that kicked off with William Salazar's *Bird Karma*. "The terrain was unknown, and the studio was trying to take care of the workforce that they had. Luckily, they'd created some really awe-inspiring shorts that went on to win some awards and tour the festivals. And we think that's one feather in the cap of DreamWorks that we should bring back, whether it's a constant or not. It's just nice to remember that was something that invigorated the community at DreamWorks, to keep trying really wild stuff and have fun doing it."



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at victoriadavisdepiction.com.

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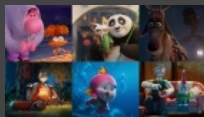
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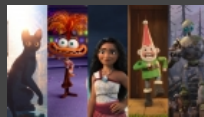
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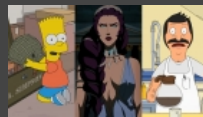
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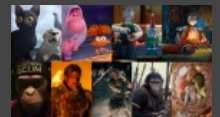
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