

Lighting The Way

Aggie Vizzers Give Back Through Mentorship

BY ANNIKA ROBERTS '22

In Texas A&M's tight-knit visualization program, former students are known for developing current students through mentorship. Although many have moved outside of Texas to work with big-name studios, and many are in high-profile, time-consuming roles, these Aggies go above and beyond to support student success.

Dave Walvoord '93 is one of those former students giving his time to help. He's a visual effects supervisor at DreamWorks Animation, and his movie credits include the *How to Train Your Dragon* sequels, *Kung Fu Panda*, *Over The Hedge*, *Ice Age* and *Fight Club*. Walvoord has also volunteered at the visualization program's Summer Industry Course, advised on many Aggies' student projects and seen his mentees go on to exciting animation careers.

In 2023, Aggies are well-represented in many visualization spheres, but Walvoord said that when he entered the animation industry, "There weren't a whole lot of people before me where I was." Luckily, Walvoord found supportive mentors in his field. He said, "I've been mentored by so many people. A lot of people have made a big difference in my career."

After earning his bachelor's in computer science at A&M, Walvoord was introduced to the animation industry through A&M's graduate-level visualization program. He described the transition from engineering to

visualization as "a natural fit," as the program seemed to attract as many engineers as it did those with art and design backgrounds.

"The graduate program's identity has always been the blending of the tech side of things and the art side of things," Walvoord said — something that he still considers a unique strength. "That's kind of special. The artists learning from the engineers and the engineers learning from the artists. I don't know that I see that anywhere else in the country."

As the Aggie Network has expanded into the visualization world, Walvoord has chosen to support younger Aggie vizzers through mentorship, because "in some ways, that's the best way I feel like I can contribute to the program," he said.

According to Walvoord, just knowing Aggies won't get you a job in visualization. The hiring process depends heavily on a candidate's portfolio of past work. Rather, he said, "the Aggies will come mentor you so that you're prepared to get the job on your own. You've got just as much chance getting a job at a company that no Aggies work at, I think, because the work is good."

"Although," he added, "if it's a company of any size, there's probably Aggies there."

One of his mentees is Toby Johnson '23, a recent visualization graduate who was then hired by DreamWorks as an intern for the spring 2023 session. A professor invited Walvoord to advise on classwork as an industry mentor in Johnson's sophomore year, and

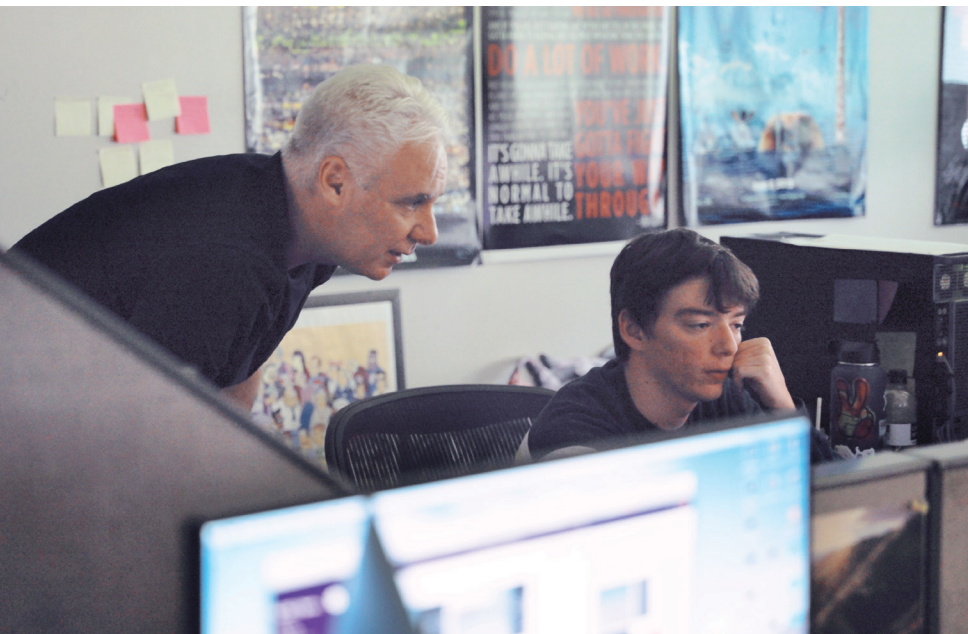


PHOTO COURTESY OF KAMU

Dave Walvoord '93 works with Toby Johnson '23 during the visualization program's 2022 Summer Industry Course. Walvoord and other DreamWorks mentors, including other Aggies, flew to College Station to work with students in person for a week.



IMAGE COURTESY OF TOBY JOHNSON '23 AND DREAMWORKS ANIMATION

Johnson described his team's short *Moonstruck* as the "culmination of everything I've learned, and it's definitely the [project] I'm most proud of." Watch the short, created by Johnson and teammates Alyssa Curran '22, Andrea Soto '23, Anna Berry '22, Gabrielle Gonzalez '20 and Van Anh Pham '24 at tx.ag/Moonstruck.

Walvoord has since coached Johnson through two student projects.

Johnson has found visualization mentorship to be highly valuable. "It's really compelling to have a mentor ... because that just makes you want to work harder and make your stuff better, so that you impress them," he said.

Johnson and teammates created a short film called *Moonstruck* during the visualization program's 2022 Summer Industry Course. Here, Walvoord and a team of other

DreamWorks mentors worked with groups of students to create 30-second films based on the prompt "a toy comes to life." (See the step-by-step process of one group's project on Page 52.)

Walvoord said that 2022 was at least the sixth year he volunteered his time at the Summer Industry Course. He said, "Working with students actually does make me better at my own job. It really does. A lot of what we do, we don't think about it, because we've been doing it for so long. But when you teach people, you really have to

think about it and be able to express it in a somewhat logical way, and [the summer course is] great for that."

Walvoord is also incredibly proud to see his student mentees succeed. "I get a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction when I see them do a project that we worked on together and I think it's excellent," he said. "I get a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction when they get their first job, when they get promoted — to know that I knew them from then. I really enjoy that. It is incredibly rewarding."



IMAGE COURTESY OF DREAMWORKS ANIMATION

Lighting is one of Walvoord's specialties. He shared his expertise in this area and others during the Summer Industry Course, teaching vizzers the same techniques that he would employ in films, such as in this scene from *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World*.