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Kevin DeWalt

MINDS EYE

Kevin DeWalt's Big Adventure

BY Christine Ramsay and Ken Wilson

When you think of Saskatchewan, you probably think of vast fields of wheat under a towering Prairie sky. You probably don't think about a thriving film and television industry. Well, think again. Total production volumes have grown from \$5 million in 1990 to \$60 million in 2000. In fact, Regina-based Minds Eye Pictures calls itself the biggest privately held entertainment company west of Bathurst Street (Toronto). As CEO and Chairman Kevin DeWalt says, "there's no reason why we can't have a film industry right here," and many share this vision: The Edge Productions, Independent Moving Pictures and Westwind Pictures in drama; Autumn Productions, Cooper Rock Pictures and Emmy award-winning Partners in Motion in documentary; Tyndal Stone Media in new media; and the Saskatchewan Filmpool Co-operative in art cinema. However, says director and Minds Eye shareholder Rob King, "No other company here has managed to do what Minds Eye has done, although many have tried."

Born in Moose Jaw, DeWalt is probably the only film and television executive in Canada who was inspired to enter the business after seeing Richard Attenborough's epic *Gandhi* in Bombay. "The reaction of the audience was incredible," DeWalt recalls. "I wanted to be able to move an audience in the same way. I wanted to do something that had an impact on people." One of five children, DeWalt grew up active in

sports, music and student politics and says he inherited his energy from his parents. Rob King, who knew DeWalt at Regina's Luther College High School, recalls him as a consummate organizer. "If we were going on a skiing trip, it was Kevin who would not only make all the arrangements but manage to get sponsorship from Molson's. He's always been a true entrepreneur," King recalls. Originally, DeWalt wanted to be a forest ranger; he applied to the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, but his marks weren't high enough, so he auditioned his way into the University of Regina's music program, where he studied voice, piano and conducting.

The summer before his final year, DeWalt went to Australia for what was to be a four-month working holiday but turned into a three-year odyssey around the world. "I didn't feel I could write about the incredible experiences I was having," DeWalt recalls, "but I knew I had to record them somehow." He decided to try film, and with Guy Anderson, a friend who joined him in New Zealand, worked in coal mines to raise enough money to buy second-hand equipment. The pair spent the next two years travelling. The trip was completely unstructured. "We would find something interesting and flip a coin," DeWalt says. "The loser would participate, and the winner would film the experience."

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They dressed like locals, smuggled cameras and film across borders, and almost made it into Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion.

When they returned, flat broke, to Regina, DeWalt worked as a waiter and approached potential sponsors for the money he needed to put the film together. "I remember going to a meeting with this guy at an insurance company," DeWalt says, "who laughed and said, 'amazing story, but if you go buy a suit and cut your hair, you'll get further, faster.'" In the end, he raised \$150,000 from the University of Regina, Luther College, the CBC and the NFB, and with assistance from others in the local, embryonic film industry – including Larry Bauman of Camera West and Don List of Birdsong – he produced a 90-minute multimedia show, *Namaste*, that used seven projectors (six slide and one film) throwing images onto three screens. "It was a glorified travelogue, with an arc," DeWalt says. "The show toured for 18 months – I did the promotions, set up and ran the equipment, sold the tickets and drove the truck to the next gig. It taught me patience: from the time I left home, to my last show, six years of my life had been consumed." *Namaste* led to a job at a local company, where he directed his first corporate video in 1985. DeWalt

Asia Nelson in *My Global Adventure*;
photo credit: Robin Lawless



hired Ken Krawczyk, who was a partner in Videotrends, a Moose Jaw company, to run the camera. In February 1986, DeWalt bought out Krawczyk's partner for \$22,000, and Minds Eye was formed. Krawczyk, currently pursuing a career as a director of photography, is still a shareholder.

Minds Eye faced a number of early challenges. "At the time, nobody was doing corporate, industrial, training or advertising work in Saskatchewan," DeWalt recalls. "We had to work for out-of-province clients – our first big project was a CF-18 training film for the Department of National Defence – before we could convince the provincial government to take us seriously." There was little money. DeWalt and Krawczyk did everything, from answering the telephone to cleaning the floors. DeWalt's parents remortgaged their house to provide a line of credit that kept the company going. "I borrowed against the line of credit and paid it back half a dozen times during the late 1980s and early 1990s," he says. King, who joined Minds Eye as a partner in 1989, recalls how the partners used their credit cards to generate cash in lean times. "Still," he continued, "Kevin would give away film to young filmmakers trying to get their start."

By late 1988, Minds Eye had grown to 27 employees, and that year produced 70 corporate videos. "But we had become a factory. It wasn't fun anymore," DeWalt says. It was time to refocus on his dream of making movies. He and Krawczyk scaled back and began to think more carefully about what they hoped to gain from the projects they took on. In 1989, they produced their first television drama, *The Great Electrical Revolution*, based on Ken Mitchell's short story. It was a half-hour period piece, set in the 1930s, shot on a budget of \$400,000, with animals, children, stunts and effects. "What could go wrong, did go wrong," DeWalt recalls. "Cables were snapping in the cold – we were filming outside in minus-50-degree wind chill – and we had a totally green cast and crew." Still, he says, "it was a thrill." It has played on CanWest Global as a Christmas special for the past seven years. Next, Minds Eye produced a hour-long drama (*Eli's Lesson*, starring Jack Palance), followed by *Decoy*, a feature with Peter Weller, shot in northern Saskatchewan. "We took on each new project for a reason," DeWalt says, "not for money, but to learn something. With *Decoy*, for example, we learned about having guns on the set, and how to blow things up."

Since then, Minds Eye has produced several more features such as *Without Malice* (with Jennifer Beals and Corey Haim), *The Unsaid* (with Andy Garcia), *Viva Las Nowhere* (with James Caan), which premiered at the Calgary Film Festival in September 2001, and *Without a Word* (with Patrick Swayze); but it's television that pays the bills, generating a revenue stream that allows the company to pursue feature filmmaking. According to Douglas Barrett, executive chair of PS Production Services in Toronto and a partner at McMillan Binch, "Minds Eye's principal business is producing high-quality TV for youth audiences."

"Everybody at Minds Eye started having kids at the same time, and so we all started watching kids' television," DeWalt explains. "We wanted to program better stuff because of all of the crap out there." The Gemini Award-winning *Incredible Story Studio (ISS)*, co-produced with Vérité Films and shot in Regina, for example, has a unique premise: kids from around the world submit their story ideas, which are adapted into 10-minute, live-action dramas. The stories are unusual, funky, strange – not the kind of thing adults would come up with. Elizabeth McDonald, president and CEO of the Canadian Film and Television Production Association, says, "ISS is absolutely different. Kevin has an eye for that." *ISS* recently ended its five-year production run, with enough episodes for broadcasters to air daily for the next two decades, DeWalt says, noting that it's seen in more than 400 million homes in 75 countries worldwide.

International broadcasters are also interested in teen-oriented drama, another area where Minds Eye excels. *Mentors*, a Gemini Award-winning children's series, which just finished its third season of shooting in Edmonton, brings historical figures into the present through a kid's computer, where they teach the youngster and his friends lessons they couldn't learn from books. *Risk* is an interactive teen drama set in a college in London's Notting Hill neighbourhood. *Mythquest*, a hour-long family drama series about two teens who discover a gateway to a world of myths through their computer, is a combination of CGI and live action shot in Calgary. And *2030 CE*, shooting in Winnipeg, takes place in a world where world peace and environmental safety have been accomplished, but at the cost of a drastically reduced human lifespan.

Right now DeWalt is particularly excited about *My Global Adventure*, which he created and produced. The series follows a young Calgary woman, Asia Nelson, on a trip through 24 countries on six continents in eight months. The show has an interactive Web site, where the audience can offer ideas, observations and advice, and vote for Nelson's next physical challenge, whether hang-gliding over the Great Wall of China or octopus hunting off the coast of Sicily. There's a clear connection to DeWalt's own around-the-world journey. "Having done this trip 20 years ago and travelling for over three years throughout the world, I know exactly what transformation Asia Nelson is going through mentally, physically and emotionally," he says. "My hope for the series is that people can see and learn about the world, its different cultures and people, so we all have a better appreciation that we are one human race."

Minds Eye has a number of features in development as well, including Jane Austen's *Lady S*, with a \$15-million budget, and *The Englishman's Boy*, based on Guy Vanderhaeghe's Governor General's Award-winning novel. Over 40 companies bid for the rights to *The Englishman's Boy*, but Minds Eye won, unique in insisting that Vanderhaeghe should write the dialogue. The film will be shot in Saskatchewan's Cypress Hills, and there is talk of Kevin Spacey or Robert Duvall – or both – for the leads. CTV has the Canadian broadcast rights. According to *The Globe and Mail's* Doug Saunders, this has some Toronto producers fuming. DeWalt is considered "an entrepreneurial genius in Regina and an annoying fool in certain corners of Toronto" because *The Englishman's Boy* eluded them. But Doug Barrett and Elizabeth McDonald beg to differ. He calls DeWalt "an able and energetic leader making important contributions" on the national and international scenes. She says that "Toronto people take him very seriously. People listen to Kevin. He has an incredible amount of energy and is really, really, really smart."

DeWalt anticipates that *The Englishman's Boy* will be a \$25-million project, and says that Minds Eye needs to demonstrate an ability to manage productions worth \$10 million, then \$20 million, to get the experience that investors will require. "It's a terrific – and expensive – script," DeWalt says, "and we're not going to do it cheaply. It's a passion of love for us, because of the quality of the book, and the Saskatchewan connection. If a sugar daddy comes along, we'll do it right away, but we will not give the project away to a third party." Since Minds Eye's biggest budget so far is \$14 million, they have a ways to go. Meanwhile, the company is working on lower budget features and line production. In addition, DeWalt wants to expand the distribution side of the business before going ahead with the project. "It's important for Minds Eye to control its destiny," he says. In the meantime, Minds Eye recently undertook a \$10-million private placement. Investors included Toronto's Working Ventures, Saskatchewan's Crown Investments Corporation and Winnipeg's Crocus Investment Fund.



2030 CE; photo credit: David Geisbrecht

DeWalt predicts continued growth for the Saskatchewan film and television industry. "The ingredients – crews, programs, facilities – are being put into place," he says. But there is a need for additional government support; Manitoba, for example, has \$2.5 million over and above the provincial tax credit program to invest in projects, and it's difficult for Saskatchewan producers to compete with this. Equity financing is offered in all provinces, except Ontario and New Brunswick, which rely on enhancements to their tax-credit program to increase production volumes. With a provincial equity program, DeWalt thinks the Saskatchewan industry could do \$100 million every year. The Canada/Saskatchewan Soundstage, a \$11.5-million venture slated to open in March, 2002 – funded by the provincial and federal governments, the City of Regina, and the Saskatchewan industry – will be a big help. There is a need for the facility. Minds Eye moved \$27 million worth of production to Calgary and Winnipeg in 2001 because of Regina's current lack of suitable facilities, and DeWalt was instrumental in the eight years it took to lobby the provincial and federal governments for funding. When it's completed, it will be the biggest sound stage in the Canadian Prairies. Valerie Creighton, CEO of SaskFilm, a non-profit funding agency that will administer the sound stage, says, "it will be a state-of-the-art, full-service facility, offering a production experience comparable to anywhere else." Of course the Soundstage will benefit Minds Eye, Creighton adds, but it will also create "a sophisticated production environment" for the entire Saskatchewan scene and beyond.

DeWalt would like to see more film students take an interest in the business side of the industry. When he started Minds Eye, he took courses from the Federal Business Development Bank, which made him realize how important it is to understand the language of bankers and investors. "The greatest films have a business plan," DeWalt says. "Success on a shoestring budget is incredibly rare." At the same time, he hopes the Saskatchewan industry will develop a distinctive, Prairie voice, and thinks that *The Englishman's Boy* will play a role in this. He believes we need to grow a new generation of filmmakers in the West who will make work that reflects their own experience. "Just go out, take a digital video camera, travel from Regina to Winnipeg, and make a film about it," is his advice to young filmmakers. "If you have to use your credit card, use your credit card. At the end of the day, if you lose it all, so what? You may have just begun the adventure of your life."

TAKE ONE