






a whole new world

 trio of Rutgers grads helps

Disney go wild—with the grottoes, gardens,
and grasslands that make the new
Animal Kingdom theme park come alive.

by  ill Glovin

Photographs by James McGoon



At Animal Kingdom in Orlando, three members of the park's inner circle—Dennis Higbie, Ismael Ranzola, and Dana Grobelmy-Worthington—huddle near the Tree of Life, the 14-story artificial centerpiece that anchors Disney's newest theme park. Serpentine paths from the tree's base snake through exotic gardens, cross a foliage-draped river, and lead to the park's painstakingly recreated African and Asian landscapes. Hundreds of visitors—many of whom arrived promptly at the park's 7 a.m. opening—are already on their way to the rides, shows, and attractions nestled in lushly sculpted terrains laced with trees, shrubs, and flowers. Most are armed

Cook Reunion

They were never on campus together, but three generations of Cook graduates—Dana Grobelmy-Worthington (CC'93), Dennis Higbie (CC'79), and Ismael Ranzola (CC'87)—worked side by side to create the lush landscapes of Disney's Animal Kingdom.

with cameras and videorecorders; many are pushing toddlers in strollers; all are anxious to beat the long lines and enjoy a wholesome and carefully orchestrated Disney experience.

"Everything about the tree—the bark, the branches, the leaves—is fake," Grobelmy-Worthington (CC'93) confesses. The base of the fantastic monolith, which is molded around an offshore drilling platform, holds a 430-seat movie theater and is decorated with undulating, hand-carved images of 325 animals. "The tree's structure consists of steel pipe, injection-molded fiberglass, plastic, and manmade leaves. But a phony tree hardly spoils the fact that we've incorporated some of the world's most exotic plants, trees, and grasses into the park's landscape."

At age 28, Grobelmy-Worthington is the youngest of the three Cook College graduates—two landscape designers and a horticulturist—who helped create the natural habitats that make Animal Kingdom a reality—the plastic Tree of Life excepted. Visitors enter through a garden corridor called Oasis, where birds, sloths, and tree kangaroos flit freely among the foliage of a tropical grotto, and cross a bridge onto Safari Village, the park's center island. Here, the Tree of Life towers over folk-inspired shops and restaurants and meadows inhabited by otters, lemurs, cranes, and storks. On the other side of Discovery River, which surrounds Safari Village, are the "lands" that visitors explore by boat, rail, truck, and foot: Dinoland, Africa, Asia, Conservation Station, and Camp Minnie-Mickey.

Now the trio are working to improve and expand Animal Kingdom, the largest and most ambitious theme park in Disney history, which opened in April at an estimated cost of \$800 million. At first glance, it's filled with the same trappings as Disney's other parks: an efficient parking and transportation

system; distinct areas featuring live stage shows and high-tech attractions; a fanciful costume parade; five theme restaurants; 10 theme snack bars; and enough souvenir shops to make the average parent feel like one of the Seven Dwarves—Grumpy, to be specific.

Notwithstanding the \$44.52 for a one-day adult admission, there are several factors that set Animal Kingdom apart from Disney's other parks. For starters, the design of the park, with 500 leafy acres of jungle, garden, and savannah settings that have the lazy feel of a zoo, is more Tarzan than Snow White. The park, five times the size of Magic Kingdom and almost twice the size of Epcot, closes at dusk when the animals are housed for the night. And finally, a considerable effort has been made to educate as well as entertain: Nature walks and Conservation Station, with its petting zoo and veterinary clinic, incorporate lessons on plants and animals, natural history, and environmental issues.

Most visitors consider the 1,000 free-ranging African and Asian animal species to be the main attraction, but to the park's designers, they are mere window dressing. The guts of Animal Kingdom are its 100,000 trees, 1.8 million shrubs, and 2.5 million grasses. The park also contains the largest assemblage of tropical and subtropical flowering trees in North America; a rare collection of cycad, a prehistoric, fernlike plant; and exotic thorned acacia and wide-trunk baobab trees. The park's 3,000 species of trees, ferns, mosses, grasses, and vines are native to every continent except Antarctica.

Complicating the management of what could pass

for one of the world's largest botanical gardens are the elephants, giraffes, gazelles, and other animals that consume and trample the carefully detailed African savannah that surrounds the park's most popular attraction, the Kilimanjaro Safari. Bouncing along

the rutted trail in camouflage-patterned, open-sided trucks, visitors—who are on a scripted mission to find ivory poachers—peer into the dense brush to spot a lolling cheetah or scan the grasslands to admire the grazing antelope. The vegetation that creates these exotic vistas needs almost constant replanting and replenishment, a job directed by the park's chief horticulturist, Dennis Higbie (CC'79).

"This was once nothing more than a cow pasture," says Higbie, the oldest of the Rutgers trio and one of Grobelmy-Worthington's mentors. As general curator of



from a stand
of bamboo
nursed from seedlings
to a 14-story artificial tree
engineered around an
oil-drilling platform, 4 million
plants grace the park.



botanical programs, Higbie, 40, manages Animal Kingdom's entire horticulture operation and its 60 plant specialists. While the park was under construction, Higbie played a major part in selecting and placing plants and in stocking and building a nursery and tree farm. "The design of Animal Kingdom originated at our Imagineering division in Glendale, California," Higbie explains, "but once the plants needed to be placed, blueprints went out the window. We had to figure out how to use plants to attract animals into spaces where guests could get an up-close look at them—after all, the animals *are* the show. At the same time, we had to learn how to use thorny plants, bushes, and trees to keep animals away from other spaces and to shape a native oak to resemble a tree you might see on the Serengeti Plains.

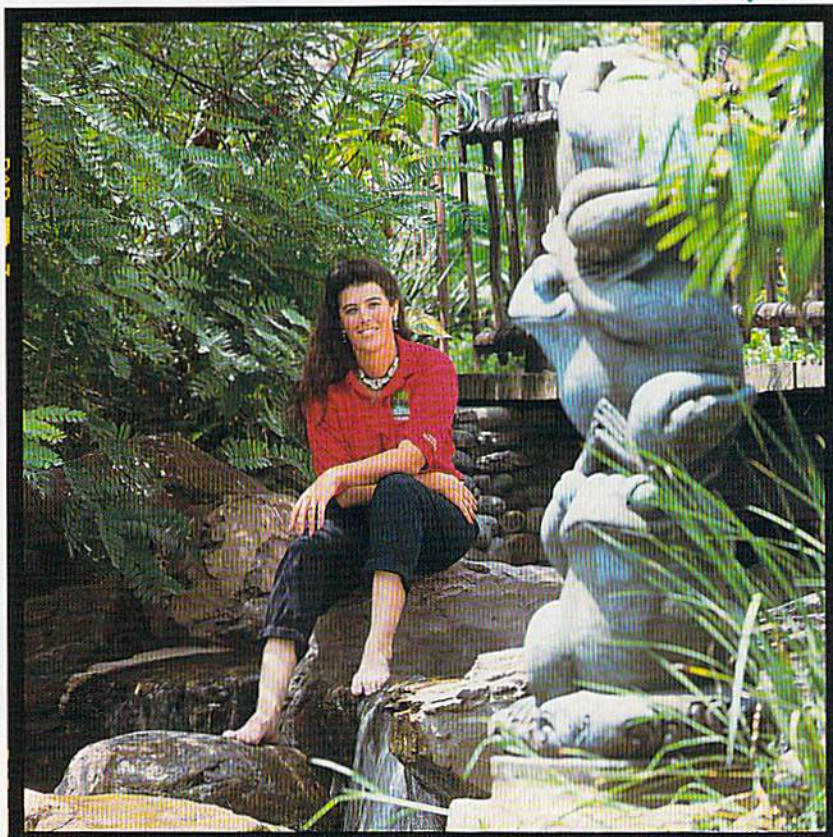
"In this environment, we've all had to match wits with some of the most accomplished plant specialists and landscapers in the world," continues Higbie, who graduated from Rutgers with a degree in horticulture. The three Rutgers colleagues were never on campus at the same time, but after many 12- to 16-hour back-breaking days leading up to the opening, they are now very well acquainted.

"I've tagged trees with Dana, and I've consulted with Dennis many times. We all consider ourselves fortunate to be involved in something of this magnitude," says Ismael Ranzola (CC'87). Before joining Disney's Imagineering division and becoming the lead landscape architect for Animal Kingdom's Dinoland section, the 33-year-old landscape architect first developed construction drawings and a plant database for the park as a consultant in California.

"In every profession, you learn an amazing amount once you start working, but Rutgers provided a solid foundation, and I believe that its reputation helped open the door for each of us," says Higbie. "Three of us graduating from the same university and representing three generations of Rutgers students is an amazing coincidence, one that speaks volumes for Cook College."

The chirping of a cell phone interrupts their reminiscences, and, as Higbie takes the call, mischievous thoughts of impending disaster creep into the imagination. Perhaps a hydraulic dinosaur at the Countdown to Extinction thrill ride has swallowed a tourist, or an animal-rights activist has handcuffed himself to a baobab tree in the 110-acre African savannah. After all, as the trio of Rutgers graduates has learned, anything is possible at Disney, the company that wrote the book on fantasy.

pride and joy: a 20- by 30-foot clump of bamboo. In 1982, Higbie received some tiger grass from master landscaper Bill Evans, who was Walt Disney's personal gardener and a major influence in the design of Disneyland and Disney World. What Higbie didn't realize—until Evans set him straight—was that hidden in the tiger grass was a small beechey bamboo plant. For 15 years, Higbie nursed the shoots into the impressive stand of bamboo that now graces the gorilla habitat. It also sends an important message about Disney's dedication to plant



development. "The willingness to invest in our nursery and tree farm long before the first dump truck rolled in here with dirt is why Disney spent less per square foot on horticulture in this park than in any other park," Higbie says.

The idea of an animal theme park was first proposed to Disney brass in 1990. At the time, Higbie was in charge of horticulture operations at Epcot; he would later move on to MGM Studios, developing and managing its program. Several months before Disney's official announcement in 1994 that it would build an animal theme park, Higbie moved to Animal Kingdom. Under his direction, the horticulture department began growing 20,000 plants in its already considerable Orlando nursery and 20,000 trees at a farm wholly dedicated to Animal Kingdom.

Jungle Fever

Next time Disney needs a romantic heroine for an animated feel-good flick, they might consider Dana Grobelmy-Worthington, who met her Prince Charming while working on Animal Kingdom.



At Gorilla Falls, where a suspension bridge spans grottoes, streams, and waterfalls that shelter gorillas, hippos, and meerkats, Higbie shows off his

Back at Rutgers, Grobelmy-Worthington was a freshman bored by her major, chemistry, and considering taking time off from school. Her parents, high school guidance counselors in Burlington County, advised their daughter to go through the Rutgers catalogue and randomly select courses that piqued her interest. She took

at a career crossroads, she sought his advice. Higbie empathized with her frustration: He, too, had started out at Disney as a gardener and within weeks, he confessed, had been convinced that he'd made the biggest mistake of his life. "Be patient," he advised her.

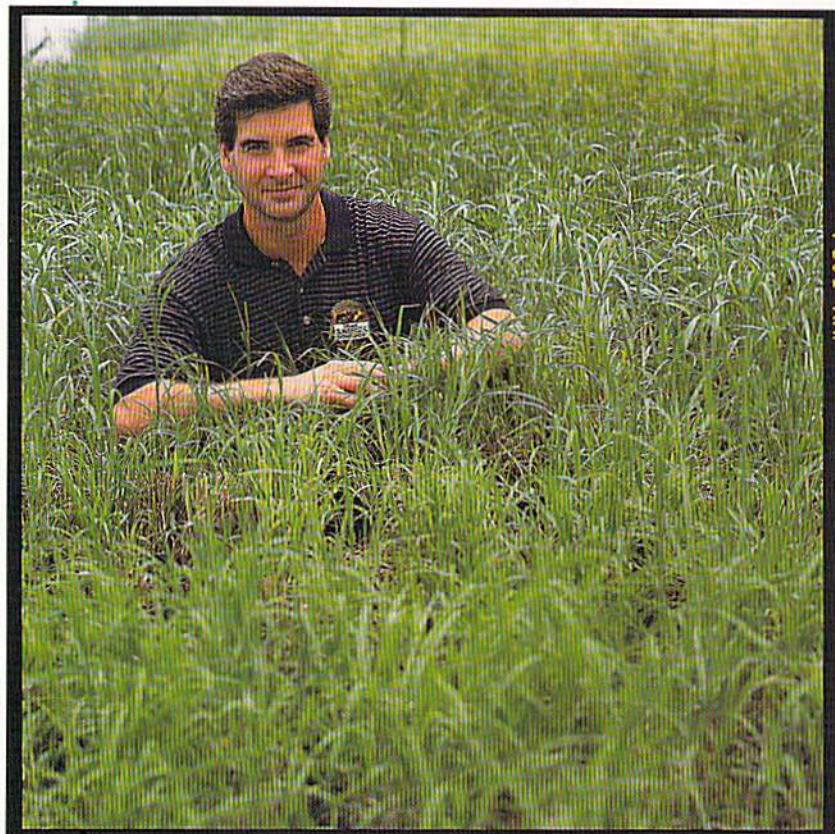
Soon after, Animal Kingdom's chief landscape architect, Paul Comstock, told Higbie that he was looking for a "knock your socks off" personal assistant. Higbie and Comstock collaborated closely whenever horticulture and landscape overlapped, from deciding which grasses are best suited to grazing to finding a moss that grows on rocks. "Dana seemed very capable, so I recommended her to Paul," says Higbie. "But Paul is very elusive. At that time, he was making contacts with nurseries and botanical gardens, flying off to Imagineering in California, and visiting Africa, the Himalayas, New Zealand, and other far-off locations to get a sense of terrain and to collect seeds and shoots. And when he *was* here, he was almost impossible to pin down."

One day, while visiting the Disney nursery, Comstock left the keys to his motorized golf cart, a ubiquitous vehicle for park personnel, in the ignition. Seeing her chance, Grobelmy-Worthington snatched the keys and waited. "When Paul came out, ready to drive off in a cloud of dust to the next project, Dana came around the corner holding the keys," relates Higbie, laughing at his colleague's moxie. "She landed the job."

But Grobelmy-Worthington still had to prove herself and, in the first month, was sternly tested by none other than legendary landscaper Bill Evans. As she drove the cantankerous 85-year-old through the tree farm one day, he demanded that she stop the golf cart, back up 20 feet, and name the tree in front of her. "I hadn't a clue," she says. "Evans growled that in a month, he'd be back, and we would have another, more extensive quiz. I never studied so hard in my life as I did in those 30 days."

Grobelmy-Worthington passed Evans' next test and paid close attention to Comstock's instructions. During the park's peak construction periods, as many as 2,600 workers a day were on the grounds installing trees, fences, and barriers, pouring concrete, digging trenches and retention ponds, and placing boulders. Soon Comstock began using his assistant as his eyes and ears with the park's many contractors. "After a while, Paul had gained enough confidence in me that he felt comfortable taking a two-week vacation and leaving everything to me," she says. "In those first six months, I had one day off—Thanksgiving—but I wasn't complaining."

Only three years removed from Rutgers, Grobelmy-Worthington found herself the construction manager



Grass Roots

Ismael Ranzola's roots are firmly planted in New Jersey: A home-cooked meal is always waiting for him at La Gran Via, his family's Cuban restaurant in Union City.

their advice and, a few minutes into her first class with Bruce Hamilton, an associate professor of landscape architecture at Cook, was sold on landscape design as a career. A week after graduating with a degree in landscape architecture and environmental planning, she was in Orlando, working as a gardener in Magic Kingdom: mowing grass, watering plants, and trimming shrubs.

Over the next two years, her duties shifted periodically. She maintained the topiary in front of Cinderella's Castle and arranged horticulture presentations for weddings, conventions, and special events. But she was also working towards her MBA at Rollins College and looking for a more challenging opportunity. "My colleagues were asking, 'What are you going to do now? You can't stay a gardener,'" says Grobelmy-Worthington. "I contemplated leaving."

When she first arrived at Disney, she made sure to introduce herself to fellow alumnus Higbie. Now,

and art director of an entire section of the park, Camp Minnie-Mickey. She began to quietly date a contractor, Howard Worthington, with whom she worked closely. On Valentine's Day of 1997, he proposed at Gorilla Falls; the two were married this past May. While Howard no longer works at the park, Dana continues to spend long hours on Asia, a new section of Animal Kingdom that will open in December. "Technically, I'm on loan to Imagineering, but I've had this temporary assignment for two and a half years now," she says, completing her career-development fairy tale.



At one o'clock in the morning, Cinderella has been home from the ball for an hour, but Ismael Ranzola is hammering three-foot stakes into an area planter in Safari Village. As the Imagineer maps out the course of a new 30-foot path that will clear up pedestrian gridlock, he carefully considers sight lines, contour, irrigation lines, and a nearby concession stand. Earlier in the day, while ordering a sandwich next to Aladdin at the employee commissary, he had said, "If you want to see this place really rocking, come back tonight after we close."

True to his word, the park swirls with activity. Large spotlights illuminate cranes, bulldozers, and golf carts that buzz through the park. Maintenance crews clear refuse and hose down visitor areas. Slapping at feisty mosquitos, Ranzola consults with a member of Highbie's horticulture staff. The pair direct workers in hard hats as they remove an 8,000-pound holly tree from a planter for transportation to the tree farm. To prepare the tree for relocation, the workers cover the sidewalk with plastic, dig a circular trench, and fasten large straps beneath the root structure. A crane stands by ready to pick up the tree and carry it away.

Ranzola doesn't seem to mind that the work is dirty and tedious: To a landscape architect, it's a dream job. "The opportunity to incorporate lighting, music, storytelling, graphics, and any number of possibilities into your work; to brainstorm with some very gifted people; and to challenge all your senses—that doesn't happen very often," he says. "At Disney, you do it every day."

When he was nine years old, Ranzola immigrated with his parents from Cuba to North Bergen. Like Highbie, he was drawn to Rutgers after attending AgField Day at Cook College. After earning his

degree in environmental planning and landscape architecture, he landed his first job with a civil-engineering firm in Hasbrouck Heights. He designed residential subdivisions, a Home Depot, and gas stations, an experience that made him a valuable commodity to firms that required an engineering design background. In 1991, his latest employer, a large New York landscape architecture firm, transferred him to their Los Angeles office to help design Disneyland's Toontown.

Two years later, Disney's Imagineering division was looking for a landscape architect with a civil engineering background to build an artificial mountain at a new water park, Blizzard Beach, in Orlando. It was only a consulting position, and there was no guarantee of more work. "Cutting the strings with a prestigious firm and relocating to Orlando was a big gamble," admits Ranzola, but it paid off. With his work on Blizzard Beach complete, Imagineering assigned him to a two-month fiber optic-paving project at Epcot's new Innoventions plaza. In 1994, a few months after hiring him to work on Animal Kingdom's Africa section, Disney offered him the job of Imagineer.

For Ranzola, joining the prestigious group of designers, writers, architects, engineers, and technicians who think up and build Disney's attractions was a dream come true. He was now part of the division that was created by Walt Disney in 1952, the one that built and opened the original Disneyland two years later. Since that time, Imagineering has built four theme parks and three water parks in Orlando and Disneyland descendants in Tokyo and Paris.

He began his work on Animal Kingdom in Africa, helping contractors interpret architectural drawings that had been made in Califor-



In addition to plants, the park's habitats include 2.6

million gallons of water and 1 million square feet of rockwork—more rock than Mt. Rushmore.



nia, then moved to Dinoland as the lead landscape architect. "I was involved with everything: paving, planting, rockwork, fences," says Ranzola. For a design element like a fence, he decided its size, style, and material, selected the railings, and even chose the welding method. For stones that circled a planter, he examined their color, size, and shape. When the contractor installed the fence or laid the stones, he made sure it was done correctly. "We wanted the stones arranged so they looked as natural as possible," he says. "I can't tell you how many times I had contractors look at me with disgust when I asked them to do some rearranging."

Ranzola points out that almost every design element imaginable—fallen trees, leafy spillover, cracks in buildings, boulders hiding planters—has been carefully orchestrated to create a worn, lived-in feeling. Visitors to Dinoland and Africa wander along paths that are intended to conjure visions of dried mud in a prehistoric or native village. The paths are actually concrete grading custom made by a Canadian contractor to Ranzola's exact specifications. "Once I was finished working with the contractor to get different samples, an art director, a show producer, landscape and building architects, and specialists in rockwork and concrete stain all got together to make the final call on which one to use," he says.

Ranzola's role as an Imagineer helped him gain a place on the park's Show Quality Standards team, which critiques all facets of the operation. Earlier that day, walking the faux mud paths from Dinoland to Africa, he'd pointed out design elements that needed to be adjusted: a sign obstructing a crucial sight line; a narrow walkway creating a pedestrian bottleneck; a fast-running waterfall damaging delicate foliage. On the safari ride through the savannah, where elephants, rhinos, and lions can come within 20 yards of the tour truck, Ranzola explains that the moats, gullies, and rockwork, although

they look completely natural, are actually clever landscaping tricks that separate animals from humans while maintaining the illusion of wide-open space. In Camp Minnie-Mickey, a rustic setting reminiscent of a summer camp in the Adirondacks, Ranzola frowns as he spots a maintenance cart tucked behind some shrubs: "If I notice it, a guest may notice it. That's unacceptable."

Stepping out of Jungle Book Theater, Ranzola stops to admire Discovery River, the manmade waterway that encircles the park and carries visitors on riverboat tours. Waving to a crowd lining the boat's rails, Ranzola says, "Watch. I guarantee that almost every single person will wave back." Just as he predicts, the passengers wave enthusiastically. "That kind of friendliness and spirit is what makes my job and this park so special," he says. He laughs to think that back on the Hudson River, near where he grew up, it's likely that some of the passengers might have returned his friendly wave with an obscene gesture.

Tacked on a wall of Higbie's office is an aerial photograph of Animal Kingdom's African savannah. Green, yellow, and red dots scattered on its surface indicate areas that need more water, replanting, or repair. In a park of this size and complexity, the simple tool isn't nearly sophisticated enough. Higbie has ordered new handheld computers for his horticulture staff, and soon each of his employees will be equipped with the latest in mobile landscape technology.

But Higbie has learned recently that technology can't solve every problem. A severe drought in central Florida is causing havoc: 10 days of devastating fires have displaced families and destroyed thousands of acres of forest in surrounding counties. At Magic Kingdom, fireworks displays have been canceled, and at Animal Kingdom, a horticulture crisis looms. The sophisticated irrigation system, starved of natural rainfall, can't accommodate the lush vegetation. Despite the gadgetry and a staff of specialists, all he can do is replace

wilting plants and augment the irrigation system with another water tank.

Higbie has come a long way from his early days mowing Disney lawns. The Huntington,

Long Island, native first realized he wanted to work for Disney during an environmental analysis course taught by landscape architecture professor Roy De Boer. Recalls Higbie: "I was sitting in a lecture hall with 400 students,

leopards and gorillas
and meerkats,
oh my!—the
park's 1,000
animals, representing
200 species, consume
three tons of food
each day.



and De Boer showed us slides of the recently constructed Magic Kingdom and the Contemporary Hotel. De Boer said that one way to measure successful landscape design is by how many people want to be in it. That made a lot of sense to me."

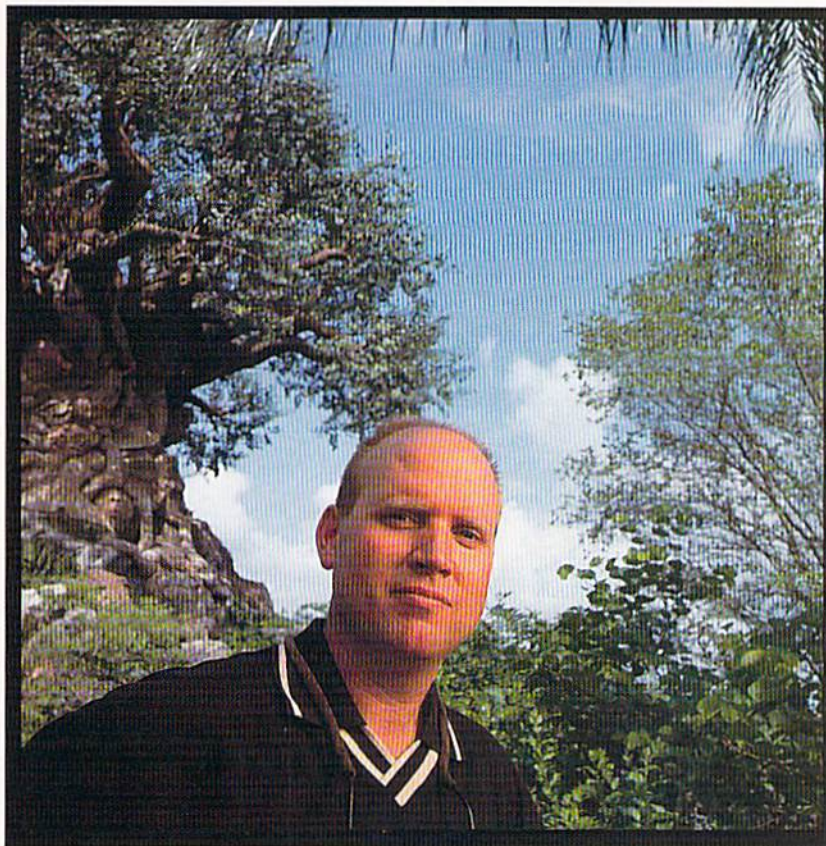
In 1982, two years after Higbie had landed a job with Disney, he called De Boer to thank him for the inspirational slide show. "I had no idea who he was," remembers De Boer, "but he invited me to take the VIP tour of Disney's Orlando property, and I've done so several times." (Not only does De Boer keep in regular touch with his former student, he now includes Higbie in the slide show that first inspired his career. In fact, it was in De Boer's class that Grobelmy-Worthington got her first glimpse of the man who would one day be a mentor.)

Higbie begins each workday at 5:30 a.m., which gives him plenty of time before tourists arrive to ride through the park, checking the plantings in the savannah, the jungles, and the gardens. To help him manage what he calls "the mother of all horticulture projects," he has assembled a team of specialists to handle sophisticated workings like a mapping system that taps into Department of Defense satellites and an irrigation system that contains rain and flow sensors, cluster control units, and 15,000 sprinkler heads. A few steps from his office, Higbie points to a nondescript desk and says, "All of Animal Kingdom's irrigation decisions are controlled by this computer."

Early media accounts of the park's opening focused on the accidental deaths of some animals, but Higbie says that no creatures died from ingesting poisonous plants or seeds. The few deaths that have occurred, he says, were due to preexisting medical conditions and accidents involving park vehicles. Because the welfare of the animals is a constant and paramount concern, Higbie's staff also includes experts on plant toxicity and on the control of insects without pesticides. Factoring in animals has caused him to rethink almost everything he knows about horticulture.

"From the minute the first animal arrived on the premises, they were the priority," he says. "We've learned to mash plants instead of clip them, that way it looks like an animal did it instead of a John Deere tractor. We've also learned to anticipate that a bird can pick up a seed anywhere, drop it in the savannah, and create vegetation that is harmful to an animal. We're constantly monitoring the savannah and have made a big effort to educate the staff so they can help us spot a plant that may be toxic to a particular animal."

Willow and oak trees are carefully placed around the savannah so that passengers can watch as mother and baby giraffes, attracted to the tasty leaves, graze within feet of the safari vehicle. The sight may elicit *oohs* and *aahs* of



delight, but Higbie and his staff have had to learn not to cringe. "You can't have the mind-set that you love the carrots you grew so much that you don't want them to be eaten. We grow everything as big and lush as possible for consumption by animals. The idea is to provide them with nourishment during the day, so that they can pass the time doing what comes naturally. I wear many hats in this job, including produce manager."

Grabbing a set of keys and his ever-beeping cell phone, Higbie zips off in his sports utility vehicle on an hour-long tour of his backstage operation: the tree farm and nursery, the water and irrigation system, the compost-recycling centers. Leaving the Disney grounds, Higbie heads to nearby Kissimmee to show off Give Kids the World, a 51-acre village that provides terminally ill children with a free, six-day, all-expenses paid Disney vacation. He is proud to have been involved in the development and expansion of the village.


It's after 5 p.m., but before heading home Higbie has some loose ends to tie up at the office. During the year leading up to the park's opening, Higbie worked six grueling days a week, and even now, with Animal Kingdom in full swing, he only sees his wife and four kids for a few hours on most weekdays. "Once the other

Green Thumbs

Dennis Higbie showed his former professor, Roy De Boer, the Animal Kingdom site when the bulldozers first arrived. Now he wants De Boer to return and critique the finished product.

(continued on page 45)

theme parks were completed, my role was limited," explains Higbie. "You can't futz much with 10 trees on either side of a beautiful lawn. But here, horticulture is deep in the middle of everything and changing every day. We affect not only the health of animals, but also how well people see and experience the animals and the rest of the park. We're trying so many new plant possibilities that it sometimes seems like we're conducting one giant experiment."

 Animals suddenly seem very much in vogue at the company whose symbol is a bland rodent. Over the past decade, Disney films like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, and a remake of *101 Dalmatians* were all enormously successful at the box office. Hundreds of millions of additional dollars were made through videocassette sales and merchandise and licensing fees. *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* have even been recast as Broadway theater. It seems almost elementary that Disney would make the leap from imaginary to real animals.

After all, Disney—which took in a whopping \$22.5 billion in revenues in 1997 alone—has become a master of diversification, adding professional sports franchises, magazines, and an Internet provider to its stable of theme parks, movie studios, and television stations. Part of the attraction and excitement of working for Disney, agree the three colleagues from Rutgers, is knowing that anything is possible. In 1990, when the company announced the Disney Decade—a list of new parks and attractions scheduled to debut before the year 2000—an animal theme park was not even on the agenda.

So it's no surprise that Higbie will soon be traveling to California for a meeting about a proposed new hotel near Animal Kingdom—one that will incorporate live animals in natural settings. Meanwhile, with the Asia section of the park set to open fully this December, the demands of replicating the rainforests and jungles of India will require Higbie to add 15 more horticulturists to his staff. The challenge of running the park's enormous horticulture program, says Higbie, "will keep me sated

for years." And Ranzola believes that his Show Quality Standards role, which will expand when Asia opens, will keep him at Animal Kingdom indefinitely.

Only Grobelmy-Worthington's future seems uncertain. Currently, she is consumed by her work on Asia, which will begin with a nature trail that takes tourists through the ruins of a palace filled with bats, monkeys, tigers, and other exotic Asian plants and animals. The trail will eventually become the waiting line for a water thrill ride called Tiger Rapids Run. Her position as Comstock's assistant has worked out well, but it's temporary, dependent on the construction and design of the park's theme sections. Although Disney has left room for future expansion, Asia is all that's on the drawing board for now.

But as Grobelmy-Worthington waits for the show to begin at the 1000-seat Lion King Theatre, life after Asia is the last thing on her mind. Bursting with pride, she's eager to show off the performance, "Festival of the Lion King," presented eight times each day. "This is the third crew; the first crew puts on an even more spectacular show," she confides, as robotic figures of Simba, Pumba, and other Lion King favorites roll from the wings. Throughout the 25-minute performance, the audience squeals with delight as acrobats in colorful African garb swallow fire, twist their limbs in strange directions, and perform remarkable somersaults to the beat of tribal music. When the actors launch into an interactive song, even the parents join in, clapping and singing with an enthusiasm that matches their children's.

"On some days, when I see macho fathers with tattoos relating to their kids in this wonderful way, my job is incredibly uplifting," Grobelmy-Worthington says. "Other times, it feels like any other day at the office." But in the next moment, she joins the crowd in mimicking the hand motions that go along with the song, and it almost seems that she's a little girl again, caught up in the Disney magic. □

A few months before receiving this assignment, senior editor Bill Glovin and his family—wife Sheryl and daughters Samantha and Melissa—vacationed at Disney World.

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