



An advertisement for Shelter Insurance. On the left is the Shelter Insurance logo, which is a blue shield with a red base and the words "SHELTER INSURANCE" in white. To the right of the logo are three headshots of insurance agents: Sarah Duffer, Dan McCloud, and Nancy Hickey. Below their names is the text "Let us help you get the right coverage at the best rate possible & help you shrink your auto premium!". At the bottom right, there is a call to action: "Click here to visit our Bowling Green agent's websites." with a small mouse cursor icon pointing to the text.

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Puppetmaster: Kemp creates career out of whole cloth

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com Nov 2, 2019

Puppeteer and puppet maker James Kemp is shown in his workshop holding Wally, one of his puppet creations.

Photo by Aaron Damme

Visiting with James Kemp is like entering an alternate reality, one full of a menagerie of animal and human characters with voices that switch pitches and accents at the drop of a cloth puppet's bonnet.

You might meet a space alien, a mutant cockroach, a queen bee, a squirrel, maybe even Col. Harland Sanders or Little Trent from the Trent Bedding commercials.

The mastermind behind this down-the-rabbit-hole world is Kemp, a 27-year-old Western Kentucky University graduate who has taken his lifelong love of puppets, cartoon characters and television programs and turned it into a successful career as a puppeteer and puppet maker.

A Gallatin, Tenn., native who now lives along Glen Lily Road in rural Warren County, Kemp has the kind of flowing dark locks and beard you'd expect to find in an Alexandre Dumas novel.

And he is a bit of a swashbuckler. Armed only with his talent for molding memorable characters out of cloth and reticulated foam and a voice as mutable as the Kentucky weather, he attacks a career path full of the sort of daunting adventures Kemp's boyhood idol Superman might encounter.

"I really, really love what I do," Kemp said Thursday as he sat in his tiny home amidst his puppet-making tools and pictures and plastic figures of characters ranging from Mickey Mouse to Luke Skywalker. "As a kid, I was fascinated by television and knew I wanted to work in TV and wouldn't be happy doing anything else."

Today, that happiness fairly erupts out of Kemp as he morphs from one puppet character to another, switching voices as easily as most people change their socks.

When he wasn't channeling Sparky the Firefly, Kemp recalled the spark that started him on his unusual career path: watching "The Great Muppet Caper" movie as a 12-year-old.

"That was the first time it hit me that there was somebody controlling these characters," he said. "It blew my mind to the point that I said, 'I want to do that. I want to bring that type of happiness to other people.'"

Starting with sock puppets, Kemp began creating characters and entertaining his friends at Gallatin's Station Camp High School. That led to a fledgling business as he sold a few of his creations. Then, while studying television and film production at WKU, Kemp got the break that made him believe his hobby could be a viable career.

Thanks to his YouTube channel and an Instagram account, Kemp was getting some attention and selling a few puppets during his college days. That transformed into a full-time job for a while after he was asked to make the puppet cast for a Swedish production of the musical comedy "Avenue Q."

"I built a 32-puppet cast," Kemp recalled. "I turned my dorm room into a shop. I failed a couple of classes because of it, but that was a high-profile job that got me some recognition."

That recognition has led to more work, including local commercials for such clients as Toyota of Bowling Green, Guarantee Pest Control and Trent Bedding. It has also landed him projects for fast-food giants KFC and McDonald's.

For KFC, Kemp built two Col. Sanders puppets and then flew to Portland, Ore., to perform them in ads that were shown online.

The McDonald's project took Kemp to Egypt, where he built a puppet character called The Big Mac Craving that was used in commercials that aired in the Middle East.

This year, Kemp has created and voiced characters such as Sparky the Firefly for a series of faith-based videos called "Slugs & Bugs."

"I'm not particularly religious, but it's still rewarding to think that you're instilling these values in kids," Kemp said. "The performing in these videos is what I'm passionate about, but building puppets is what pays the bills."

He's doing plenty of that, including some work making puppets for Bowling Green's Kids on the Block nonprofit that takes educational and character-building programs into local schools.

"There's no longer a national Kids on the Block organization that provides puppets," said David Hosay, a Kids on the Block board of directors member who has worked with Kemp through the WBKO television station and at Bowling Green's Sublime Media Group video production company. "We were lucky that James was available to make those for us."

Hosay believes Kids on the Block is getting a top-notch puppet maker.

“James is a world-class talent right here in Bowling Green,” Hosay said. “He’s super talented, and he’s great at both building puppets and performing. It has been great to see his growth.”

Where will that growth take him?

The only certainty, Kemp asserts, is that it isn’t leading to a 9-to-5 job.

“There are times when I have no idea where my next paycheck is coming from,” he said. “At those times, I might wonder if I’d be better off if I had a 9-to-5 job, but it’s a fleeting thought.”

The future does look bright for Kemp, who will be creating a number of new puppets for Kids on the Block and has other projects in the pipeline.

Through his association with Edward Eyth Creative Concept & Design, Kemp has landed work making puppets for the popular “Baby Einstein” multimedia brand that caters to preschoolers and their families.

Although his name and his work are now known internationally and his YouTube and Instagram accounts continue to build his brand, Kemp isn’t forgetting his roots.

On Thursday, Kemp held the first sock puppet he ever made – a green, Muppet-like creature with yellow hair and pingpong-ball eyes – and reminisced.

“It’s weird to think I’ve been doing this for half my life,” he said. “I’ve been so fortunate to have the opportunity.”

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