

## Working For Peanuts

**A career change landed noted film producer and special-effects whiz Mike Travers in the doghouse—and he couldn't be happier about it.**

Published: 01/28/2016  
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Back in the early 1990s, New Rochelle resident Mike Travers' life looked a lot like Homer Simpson's. "I was working at a nuclear power plant, shuffling a lot of papers," he says. Though his education had prepared him for the demands of the job—he'd graduated from Tufts University with a degree in mechanical engineering—it hadn't prepared him for the boredom of it all. "It was nothing like the cool design projects we'd tackled in school, and I was unhappy," he shares.

Then came the call that changed his life. "My younger brother was out in California, interning for a company that made the software all the film studios were using for their special effects," Travers, 46, says. "In 1994, he phoned and told me, 'Mike, you have to come out here! People don't know how to use this software. I bet you could figure it out and help them.'" So Travers took a chance. "I left my Fortune 500 company and went to work for a place in California called Mister Film, where you had to remind the boss to pay you every Friday," he laughs.

Yet, it was a move that would transform his alter ego from Homer Simpson to Snoopy. Recently, Travers produced *The Peanuts Movie*, which debuted in November to critical acclaim (the *New York Times* dubbed it "charming" and "daring") and earned a cool \$45 million in its first weekend. "I oversaw all the business aspects of the film, from handling the staffing to making sure it got delivered at the right length," he says. And timing was crucial: "This is the 65th anniversary of the comic strip's debut, and there's a tremendous amount of Peanuts fans out there. We wanted to do Charles Schulz's legacy justice," says Travers of Peanuts' late creator.

As for Travers' own legacy, he's steadily progressed from smaller studios to larger ones over the past two decades, leaving a trail of memorable special effects in his wake. "After Mister Film I moved to Dream Quest Images, where I worked on *Crimson Tide*, and *The Rock*," he recalls. "I was using my physics and engineering training to make things melt and explode on-screen."

For a young man looking for challenges, there were plenty: "This was the start of using computers to create

effects,” he explains. “One of the hardest things to do was to make water look real. Nobody likes to shoot anything underwater, but to mimic the effect on the computer was so difficult.” He was proud to get it right: “You couldn’t tell it wasn’t real,” he says.

A move to Sony Pictures Imageworks was “my first big job,” Travers shares. “We did big movies, like *Starship Troopers* and *Godzilla*, with Matthew Broderick.” Yet, it’s the camp hit *Anaconda* that Travers seems to remember most affectionately, perhaps because he was the force behind one of the movie’s most striking moments. “My claim to fame was that I animated the shot where a snake regurgitates Jon Voight,” he laughs. It’s a scene so realistic that since 1997 it’s left viewers uncertain whether it was real.

After that, Travers moved on to a different kind of film, *Stuart Little*, a children’s flick. “I led the team that did Stuart’s clothing. That was the first time we ever did simulated clothing on a digital main character, and I loved doing that. It was fun because it felt like we were telling the main story,” he recalls. Right around then, he got word that Blue Sky Studios had been given a green light to make the first *Ice Age* movie. Travers, who’d by then gotten married (he and his wife, Joan, now have two children), leapt at the chance to join the team, and the couple moved from California to New York (Blue Sky Studios is located in Greenwich, CT).

For Travers, who was born in Plymouth, MA, the region felt closer to his roots—yet finding the right spot took time. “We lived for a year on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and loved it,” he says, but the couple soon outgrew their “box of an apartment,” as Travers calls it. “We moved to Westchester to be closer to the studios and to start a family,” he says. After a few years in Bronxville, he and Joan bought a home in New Rochelle. “We like its diversity,” Travers explains. “Being surrounded by people from all walks of life, with varied careers and backgrounds, is important. We want our kids to grow up in an environment that is dynamic, interesting, and rich in culture.”



The environment at Blue Sky, then a fledgling studio, was dynamic, too. “We didn’t have whole departments of people to make the first *Ice Age*,” Travers recollects. “We had to hire people and teach them to do their specific part of the process. So much was figured out on the fly.” The team succeeded, and the 2002 movie was a smash, spawning multiple sequels (Blue Sky Studios is currently working on *Ice Age 5*).

If the first *Ice Age* was a triumph of improvisation, *The Peanuts Movie* was a product of meticulous preparation. The film, released in 2015, had been in the works since 2007. “We created a short, just to show

the Schulz family what we could do,” Travers says. “Craig, the son of Charles Schulz, had been pursued by every animation company looking to make a movie. He saw something in us, in *Blue Sky*. And after meeting with our director, Steve Martino—who’d done *Horton Hears a Who*—and seeing our dedication and effort, it pushed it over the line.”

For Travers, too, things have fallen into place: a great job, a great family to come home to—and a great life in Westchester. “They say you can’t pick your neighbors, but we really lucked out with ours,” he shares. “On our street alone, we have retired school teachers, entertainment executives, entrepreneurs, nonprofit executives, and finance professionals, all of whom are not shy about belting out Christmas carols at the annual holiday party and are very supportive when the neighborhood kids set up the summer lemonade stand.”

Travers is supportive of children, as well, volunteering with his son’s Cub Scout troop, giving career-day talks at local schools and making Skype presentations about animation to at-risk school kids in Mississippi.

When he’s not at home or working, Travers can usually be found doing something outdoorsy: “In comparison to living in L.A., I think there’s more variety of geography and interesting things to do within a shorter distance in Westchester,” he says. “You can be in urban White Plains and travel 30 minutes by car and be fly fishing on the Cross River or camping at Ward Pound Ridge,” he observes.

Fortunately, Travers has also found much to be thankful for in his animation career. “I love what I do,” he says. “It’s unusual to be in an environment surrounded by such skilled, creative, technically talented people who want to come together and tell great stories.” Stories much like his own.

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## ***Peanuts Confidential***

**A local kid voices Charlie Brown!** Noah Schnapp, from Scarsdale, took the honors.

**One scene in the movie had to be redrawn.** “We’d made a library that had stone lions on its steps. Then our legal department informed us that the New York Public Library is very protective of that image. So we redid it with something else on the steps instead,” says Travers. (To find out what, see the *Peanuts* movie.)

**Woodstock’s chirp is a trick!** Voice artist Bill Melendez created it for the original animated TV specials by recording his own voice and then playing it back at a higher speed. The new movie uses Melendez’s original recordings.

**We finally see the little redhaired girl.** Yes, the object of Charlie Brown’s romantic intentions is finally revealed in *The Peanuts Movie*. “He’s seeking her affection, and we found in the process of telling the story that there’s no way to avoid showing her. It would have been too weird,” says Travers.

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