

WDeye Online

by Vivien Santana Hughes



Note: interview subjects' last names have been deleted from Imagineering pieces written for internal publication.

Tom's Nine Lives (Give Or Take)

Sometimes the standard questions don't apply. So when we encounter an Imagineer with an unusual hobby, or a particularly interesting endeavor or life experience, a more extensive style of *WDeye* profile is in order. Like when we wrote about the Rockwork Engineering manager who's a lounge singer by night (Betsy [REDACTED]). Or the financial systems analyst who ran a 100-mile race through the Himalayas (Barbara [REDACTED]). Or the inspirational casting coordinator who survived a car accident and double amputation to walk—and work—again (Brian [REDACTED]).

With this in mind, I strolled into principal computer systems analyst Tom [REDACTED] new office at 830 Sonora thinking I knew his angle. Coordinator Julie [REDACTED] told me he was an accomplished magician. Performed at Hollywood's exclusive Magic Castle even (he's been a member for a dozen years).

So I sat back hoping to see a few good magic tricks and figure out if he has something hidden up his sleeve. And as he performs several card tricks, Tom's sleight of hand is good—*great*, in fact.

But the trump card he *does* offer is of a, well, different breed. . . .

"I've had a few different past lives," Tom says. (And we're not talking the Shirley MacLaine variety.) He pulls out an old photo and there's Tom—with long hair and a beard, but it's definitely him—*WRESTLING A TIGER!*

"Remember the Enchanted Village in Buena Park?" he asked. "It was the Japanese Deer Park before it became the Enchanted Village." (I didn't, but nodded, still unable to take my eyes off that picture.)

"In the late '70s I decided I wanted to work with animals. I got a job as an animal keeper, and after four months was promoted to animal trainer—mostly for tigers and elephants," says Tom, as if he were training, say, kittens and puppies. "We performed a show where a bad guy would bother these people who lived with their animal friends. And in the end, the bad guy would get attacked by a lion or a tiger. I used to 'take the hit.'" (FYI: the tiger in the photo, Kipling, weighed 450 pounds.) "He'd jump up, I'd grab him and hang on. . . and then slam into the ground. Then we'd wrestle a little and I'd head for the water to escape. That was a lot of fun!"



left
Tom earned his stripes as an animal trainer by wrestling cuddly kitties like Kipling at the Enchanted Village.



right
"Notice how high our feet are off the ground?" asks Tom. "The tiger came out of there like a freight train." Not pictured: they next hit the ground, wrestle and Tom then escapes into the water!

Ah yes, fun, fun, fun. But did anything, er, dangerous happen? "One time, when I was first learning how to take a hit, the other trainers had this two-year-old lion on a chain," Tom recalls. "They had the lion jump up on me and as I started to fall he got up by my head. While it was happening—in the space of seconds—I felt his mouth completely over the back of my head and neck. They pulled him off and his tooth scraped across the back of my neck and left a big raised welt. Then afterwards the trainers told me, 'If this lion gets near your head, he gets real excited and he'll try to bite ya. He's a real headhunter!' The lion, Bullet, actually wound up biting two trainers a couple of months later."

Near miss or no, Tom still went on with the show for a year. He says, "Working with animals is really magical. . . ."

Which reminded me of why I was there: magic! So what's *that* story?

“About 13 years ago I took up magic because I wanted to get a Magic Castle membership,” says Tom. (You don’t have to be a magician to be a member but you do save quite a few bucks on dues.) Armed with “some good books from the magic shop” Tom spent about a year learning his craft, was interviewed by and performed close-up magic for the imposing Magic Castle Membership board and—*voilà*—was voted in. “For the next five years, magic was my passion,” recalls Tom. “I would go to the Castle at least one night a week, and often two or three times in a week. While I don’t go as often now, I still enjoy taking friends to the Castle and doing an impromptu show.”

If you want to find out more about Tom’s magic, you’ll have to stop by his office—I counted four decks of cards in his right hand drawer—or maybe you could try one of the wood, rope and ring puzzles, of escalating difficulty, that decorate his desk. To see Tom perform a magic trick right now, click on the video link at left.

And the other past lives? Tom was a mechanical piping designer for Fluor Corporation, created movie miniatures and special effects for films including *Beetlejuice*, *Critters 2*, *The Blob*, and a number of others, and was hired into the WDI Dimensional Design department in 1988 to work on the Euro Disney model. In his current role, Tom provides front-line CAD user support for the Show Ride Engineering group. That doesn’t quite add up to nine, but I dare say he used up a few lives at the animal park.

These days Tom has settled down. He and his wife of six years, staff assistant Myra [REDACTED] (who also works in WDI’s Show Ride Engineering), enjoy country-western dancing. His two daughters, Eryn and Lisa, are in college. He’s a film buff with an ever-growing collection of more than 700 movies. And Tom and Myra have just purchased a 2 1/4-acre ranch in Acton that they plan to fill with animals like horses, cats, dogs, maybe even a few chickens.

I stand to go but Tom is gazing at the photo in which he’s nuzzling Kipling. “Come to think of it,” he says wistfully, “there *is* plenty of room at our ranch for a tiger. . . .”