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**Profile: Joe Young Jr.**

Joe Young Jr. is always talking about his team, that is particularly evident these days with the *Diamond Ruff* movie project.

From the writing and publishing in 2009 of the *Diamond Ruff* book to the making of the movie, Joe and his team have kept the project moving forward, with his hectic schedule of running Young Studios in Hartford and being dad and husband, and even in the throes of bad economic times.

“Everyone who participated brought something to the table,” Joe, 47, said of current and former members of his team. “There is education in every situation. I believe we have a strong team, they are talented but more important they are committed and willing to sacrifice. With these ingredients, we can do great things.”

“Kyle (his eldest child) has been with me from the beginning of the project. Geannetta Bennett (a long-time associate) has always been part of it,” he said. “We have new people who seem like they’ve been here a lot longer. These are the trusted people who you take to the top with you.”

Joe's hectic schedule is now turbo-charged with seemingly endless meetings, phone conversations and details to review. But before the Diamond Ruff team, movie scripts and contracts, Joe was a member of another important team.

Joe Young Jr., who would become a cartoonist, artist, animation producer, writer, businessman, and now movie producer, was part of a Hartford team headed by Joseph Young Sr., a machinist, and his wife, Lillie Mae Young, a nurse. The Youngs eventually moved to Bloomfield where they raised their seven children: Keith; and three sets of fraternal twins, Andrea and Anthony, Joe and Janis, and Felicia and Felipe.

Joe said of his father: “He [taught] us that consistency gets results and to look at the bright side of things.”

Joe said of his mother, who is deceased: “She taught us that most dreams are in reach, if you put God first, share with others, be loyal to family, and work hard.”

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Even though his mother is gone, she is always with him, he said, noting his mother's spirituality and her ability to size up people and situations.

"It's kind of like she lives in me when I'm dealing with something," Joe said. "I say, 'What would she do and say in this situation.'"

Joe said his father had a knack for drawing. Joe's creativity surfaced at about age 7 when he wrote his first play, "John Lee", and performed it for his family. John Lee was an underdog who overcame obstacles to be successful. "My thing has always been creating characters with a message."

Joe attended Metacomet and St. Gabriel schools, and Northwest Catholic High School. He dropped out of Southern Connecticut State University to raise his young son Kyle.

"At first it was very difficult" being a 21-year-old single dad, he said. "But with my mother's help I flipped around the situation. I became more focused, which allowed me to achieve some goals early on." He said those early times with Kyle "were golden. It showed me I could truly make a difference in someone's life."

And seemingly like father and grandfather, Kyle became interested in art – as soon as he could hold a pencil. As time went on, he was introduced to drawing, cartooning, writing, and animation. He can do it all.

"He added music to his work," Joe said, "that's all him, I'm a terrible music person."

Kyle, who recently received a BFA degree in Cinema and Television from Columbia College Hollywood in Los Angeles, is working closely with his dad on the movie.

"To work with your child on a mutual goal is a dream come true," Joe said, "It's extra special because of our personal story. Things come full circle."

In addition to Kyle, Joe said his whole family is involved in Young Studios. Joe and his wife Teresa live in Springfield, Mass., with their children Kyle, 25, Johnny 19, and Paige, 15.

At the same time he was raising Kyle, Joe started Young Publications, which eventually evolved into Young Studios. He worked at various jobs and contract jobs while developing his business.

"I'd read books on selling art and being an entrepreneur," he said.

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In the beginning, Joe said he just wanted to be an artist with a comic strip. From a simple beginning came Young Studios, now a full-service graphics and advertising agency, and a comic strip very close to Joe's philosophy of social responsibility.

In 1988, Young created *Scruples*, a comic strip about orphans dealing with social issues. Since its inception, *Scruples* has been featured in national syndication and on television. The 1999 *Guinness Book of World Records* recognized Young as the official holder of the longest comic strip in the world.

Another project very close to Joe is the Joe, Picture This Show Inc., a 501 (c) 3 youth arts agency, and its Hartford Animation & Film Institute. He has been recognized by the White House and locally for his community involvement through the agency. The institute provides instruction in the digital arts for underserved young people in the community.

“For whatever reason my work always has a social conscience to it,” he said.

The message of *Diamond Ruff* is that “anyone can overcome obstacles and mistakes, if you tap into the power of the human spirit.”

Is there a part of Joe Young in *Diamond Ruff*, or *Diamond Ruff* in Joe Young?

Joe said he sees similarities in *Diamond*'s knack for business and sizing up situations, and his love of the arts. “But I see more of myself in [Rev.] *Trek Woods*. Not necessarily the religious stuff, but the spirituality and believing in someone.”

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