

## **On the road with URI's Dana Neugent**

**By Paula Foohey**

After stumbling upon a book lying on the floor of the 20-person Cape Cod commune where he lived in 1970, Dana Neugent decided on a whim to drive his Volkswagen from Rhode Island to Oregon to pay the book's subject a visit.

Penned by Tom Wolfe, the 1968 book was the story of Ken Kesey, author of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," and his band of "Merry Pranksters."

Wolfe's book, "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," is an account of the group's cross-country trek in a DayGlo painted schoolbus nicknamed "Furthur" and their use of psychedelic drugs to reach personal revelations.

Upon arriving in Oregon, Neugent found a phone book and dialed Kesey from a pay phone. Neugent told him of his journey and asked to chat with Kesey about his experiences. Kesey told him to come to his farm. Neugent, now a film professor at URI, ended up living there in a tent for two weeks.

Always quick with a smile, Neugent believes that in order to truly enjoy life, you have to pursue your interests. "We're given a life, and that's all we really have," he said.

Now 60, Neugent is still a dreamer. He says if he could meet anyone it would be John Lennon. "He changed my life," Neugent said. "He changed the world, really. He embodies a lot of characteristics I would like to think that I embody. He is an artist who worked within the system and still kept his integrity. He was also a man of peace. He opened minds for generations and his work continues to do so today."

The soft-spoken Neugent, an Ashaway resident, co-owns a blues club, the Knickerbocker Café, on Railroad Avenue in Westerly. Somehow he manages to run a

video production business, teach three courses and act as media supervisor at URI's Providence campus.

On a freelance basis, Neugent creates videos for people at URI and elsewhere. He puts much of the money he makes from these projects into grants that are donated to projects made by film students from low-income areas in Providence.

His two college film courses are augmented by a film class at URI held for students from Providence's Classical High School. The high school class features a curriculum similar to the college courses, although simpler.

The object is to familiarize students with the university atmosphere and familiarize them with available resources. The program teaches them to shoot, edit, create special effects and more. Neugent says the kids have heard discouraging words like "you can't" for much of their lives. Therefore, they enjoy seeing their creations and can burn them to disks to share with their friends and parents.

When we met, the merry Neugent grinned warmly and led me into the URI television studio in Chafee Hall, a familiar location quite comfortable for him. It was here that we conducted the hour-long interview, though when his upcoming class was ready to begin, neither of us wanted to stop.

Neugent, who prefers students to call him by his first name, enjoys the variety of his current profession. Because every day is different, he says, he rarely works traditional "9-to-5" hours.

Neugent travels between the Providence area and Kingston to teach and across the world to film. Over his filmmaking career, he has filmed in Honduras, Cuba, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, among other locations.

After graduating from URI in 1974, he was unable to find a job so he stayed at the felt mill where he had been working second shift for the previous two years.

Of his experience at the factory, Neugent says, "It was awesome. I liked it a lot. It was in some ways like my grad school. I got to see people in the real world. College isn't the real world -- trust me."

When he graduated, he was faced with a \$10,000 loan debt. He bought a tent plot for \$250 per year near the factory and lived there for two years until he paid his debt in full. He remained at the mill for six years after graduation -- until he was fired for going on strike.

Neugent says he paid the bulk of his college tuition with his factory wages and with money he made from playing guitar in rock band, "The Lovin' End," during college.

He entered the world of film production at 33. A state law mandating public access programming on the then-new cable television system opened that door for him. Neugent was interested in learning to use the equipment, but Rhode Island did not have an available tutor, so he taught himself. Eventually, after enough badgering, the state hired him to teach others.

After teaching for about three months, he was hired to make commercials, which aired from Boston to Hartford and New Haven. It was a lucrative and enjoyable activity for Neugent. In the first year the commercial production crew made \$50,000, and revenue grew to about \$3 million in the last year.

Just as he has explored a variety of careers, Neugent takes great pleasure in exploratory road trips. He has driven across the country many times, and says he had done so three times by the age of 21, inspired by Jack Kerouac's "On The Road."

Neugent, a sporadic tent-dweller, also lived in a variety of locations. His favorite was Monterrey, Calif., where he lived for two years. He saved his money from the factory and filming projects to travel.

Early in his film career, Neugent filmed and produced a documentary called “Blood in Blood Out” about gangs in Connecticut prisons. An intern from UConn was originally involved, but she was too frightened by the atmosphere to continue working, so he did it himself. The documentary aired on cable TV.

Currently, he is working with The Rhode Island State Council on the Arts to promote media education programming to kindergarteners through twelfth-graders throughout the state.

Their goal is to create a network among all schools with media programs so that expensive equipment can be shared. Ideally, schools will pool their equipment and work together so lower budget schools can use it as well.

“I live a pretty simple life, really,” Neugent said. “I don’t need much,” he explained, although he did say that if his funds were unlimited, he would buy a house in Monterey and travel between there and Rhode Island “to wherever the weather is best.”

To this day, Neugent continues his roving ways, true to his motto: “I will do it my way and suffer the consequences.”

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