


METRO & STATE

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DISNEY

Students put magic in kingdom

Disney may get some bright ideas from four imaginative University of Miami students.

BY VIVIAN MUNOZ
El Nuevo Herald

Their imagination, skill and enthusiasm has carried them to what some consider the summit of creativity: the world of Disney.

Four University of Miami students have joined an elite group of 31 young people from five countries who became finalists in the Walt Disney competition Imagineering Imaginations.

The objective of this international contest was to propose a new attraction for the Disney parks. The Miami students came up with a new style of theater, called "Kingdom Earth."

Frank Stevens, Eric Suárez, Michael Jenkins and Lesley Wheatley created a digital attraction that utilizes the latest in hydraulic technology, holographic projection and visual effects to produce an "activated theater."

"We created a theater where each seat moves to allow the theatergoer react to the characters in the play, who are projected in three dimensions," explained Frank Stevens, who is in the fifth and last year of architecture at the University of Miami.

INTERACTIVE THEATER

"This way we contribute to the new Disney trend to create interactive characters in the parks," said Stevens, 28, born in Miami to Salvadoran parents.

The four students visited the Disney studios in Glendale, Calif., three weeks ago, along with 10 other teams. For two weeks, they worked on their project, assisted by Disney's "imaginizers," and then submitted it to a jury of Disney executives.

"What impressed us the most was the work of the imaginizers," Stevens said. "They have more than 140 disciplines, from sculpting to architecture, engineering,



GARY KRUEGER/THE MIAMI HERALD

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI: Local students Lesley Wheatley, Michael Jenkins, Frank Stevens and Eric Suárez are finalists in Disney's Imagineering design contest.

The contest is seeking new attractions for Disney theme parks, and encourages students with artistic abilities to consider careers in the creative and technical arts.

drawing and acting."

"Marty Sklar's vision at Disney World has been a continuous source of inspiration for talented youths to believe in themselves and imagine, design and create without limitations," said Ali Habashi, a professor of computer design at UM and director of the Arnold Center Media Lab, who guided the students in their project.

Sklar created the Imagineering Imaginations project.

"I think our students who reached the finals will now go forward with new self-confidence in what they can achieve," Habashi said.

The contest encourages students with artistic abilities to consider careers in the creative and technical arts,

including digital arts, engineering and architecture.

The team said they were grateful for the opportunity to participate. The Disney company paid for their two-week stay in California.

"This was a unique life experience; I will always remember it," said Michael Jenkins, 22, a senior in computer science studies at UM. He was born in New York City to a Puerto Rican family.

'TREMENDOUS' CHANCE

Eric Suárez, 23, saw it as "a tremendous opportunity for creative youngsters in Miami-Dade to display their talent before a special audience of professionals."

"We all now have a chance to work with Disney in the

future," said Suárez, a Cuban-American born in Miami, who majored in computer engineering at UM.

The 11 teams of finalists were at the Walt Disney Imagineering Center in Glendale, Calif., July 16-27. During that time, they finished their projects and made presentations to a panel of judges.

They also met with the creative and technical engineers who are in charge of the Disney parks and attractions worldwide and applied for internships.

The other finalists are teams from Exeter University (Britain), Universidad Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil), University of British Columbia and the University of Waterloo (Canada), Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh), Destination Imagination (Illinois), Hampton University (Virginia), Pratt Institute (New York), the University of Kansas and the University of Southern California.