

# 'Lord of the Rings' special effects master joins 'Kotter' actor on G-Star faculty

By KEVIN D. THOMPSON

Hollywood keeps coming to G-Star School of the Arts.

This past summer, Ron Palillo, best known as mouthy classroom goofball Arnold Horshack on the popular television series *Welcome Back, Kotter*, was hired to teach acting at the charter high school near Palm Springs.

Now comes Dean Lyon, a veteran visual effects supervisor whose credits include all three *Lord of the Rings* films, *Armageddon*, *Air Force One* and ...Taco Bell's talking chihuahua.

Yes, Lyon helped itty-bitty Gidget mouth the slogan "¡Yo Quiero Taco Bell!"

"It was unique to have an animal talking back then," Lyon said. "You'd think nothing now of having a dozen animals speaking."

Lyon will teach two evening adult education classes at G-Star — "Visual Effects 101" and "Splinter Studios Film Symposium" — starting Feb. 1.

"Dean is one of the giants in the visual effects industry," said Greg Hauptner, G-Star's founder and chief executive. "He's worked on some of the biggest films of all time. It's a perfect fit for us."

Two other Hollywood vets will also teach adult education classes: Palillo will teach "Acting for the Media," and Alan Benjamin, a former executive for MGM and United Artists who has been with G-Star for more than six years, will teach a business film class.

As for Lyon, he got his start at G-Star this past summer while working as a visual effects supervisor on the student film *It's a Dog Gone Tale: Destiny's Stand*. Hauptner remembers Lyon being extremely inquisitive on the set.

"He kept asking me questions about the school and what we're doing, which I thought was a little odd," Hauptner said. "But there was a method to his madness."

Turns out, Lyon wanted to build a visual effects studio on the school's back lot. The company is in start-up mode, with Lyon still looking for investors.

After working in Hollywood and New Zealand for years, Lyon was ready for a change and knew he wanted to work for G-Star while teaching a *Lord of the Rings* seminar at the school.

"The kids really asked intelligent questions," Lyon said. "They were better than most university classes. I realized there was a potential to help mentor these kids."

As for working with director Peter Jackson on the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Lyon said it was a great experience.

"Peter is a very down-to-earth, creative genius," Lyon said. "We showed a preview of the first film at Cannes and everybody was complaining because Peter wasn't wearing a tie. The crew was saying we were lucky to get him there in shoes."

But Lyon is happy that part of his work is shifting to the classroom and that he is helping to shape and inspire young minds.

"There was a time in Hollywood when I was known for explosions and talking animals," he said. "Neither of which I want on my tombstone."