

a look at the life & work of
albuquerqueans who deserve a toast

PERSONALITY



Moving Images

*Thanks to Joseph Conti and his visual effects wizardry,
movies will never look the same again*

Spend some time with Joseph Conti and you'll find yourself questioning what you see. Is that helicopter really in the sky—or a creation of ContiFilms? Always on the cutting-edge of film production, Conti lives a life of what he calls “miracles”—and many of them involve Albuquerque.

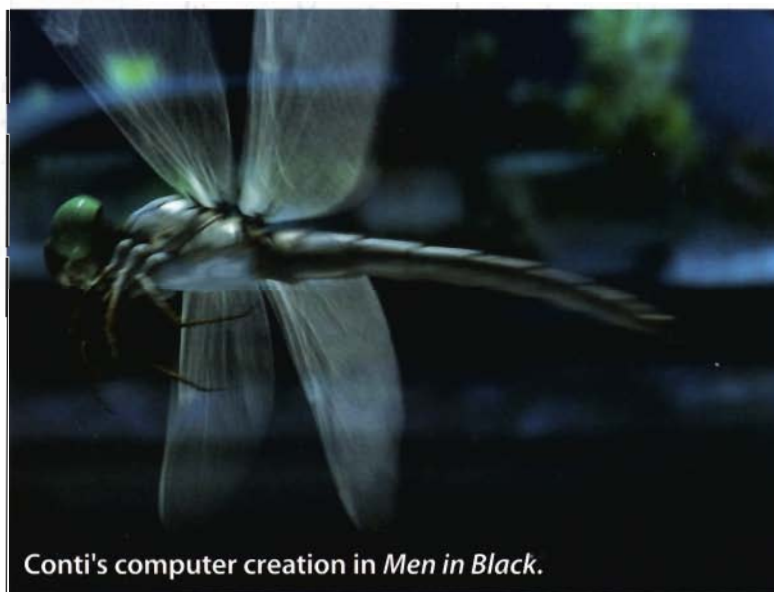
Like a lot of 14-year-olds in the 1970s, Joseph Conti was awed by the special effects in the movie *Star Wars*. From the beginning, Conti had a lot of support in his dream.

“My mom never held me back in my interests,” he says. “So when I said, ‘Hey Mom, I’m going to build a motion picture special effects studio in our basement and blow up spaceships and stuff,’ she said, ‘Okay, go for it.’”

A decade later, Conti left the Army after two years of service. Driving through Los Angeles on his way to Albuquerque, where his brother lived, Conti happened on a convention celebrating the tenth anniversary of *Star Wars*. He went inside.

“I ran into my all-time idols—Richard Edlund and John Dykstra—who had done the special effects [on the movie]. I started a conversation and the words of wisdom were, if I wanted to do special effects, I’d have to be in L.A.,” he says.

But Conti wasn’t quite ready for the Los Angeles scene.



Conti's computer creation in *Men in Black*.

Instead, he continued with his plan to start a master’s program at UNM. During his first semester, Conti met Brad Carvey, a respected special effects wizard based in Albuquerque.

“There’s a whole series of things—if I explained how bizarre and crazy they were, you’d be like, ‘It could never have happened,’” he says. “If I’d gone straight to Los Angeles after the Army and not come here, I never would have met Brad.”

Carvey was designing a 3-D graphics tool called Video Toaster, which Conti says was a decade ahead of its time. “[Carvey] let me see this technology that I went on to use,” he says. “The reason I also got hired by Steven Spielberg was

because I had tools invented by Carvey here in New Mexico.”

A piece of his destiny served, Conti summoned the mettle to move to L.A.

“Everyone had given me all these fears: ‘You’re never going to make it. You’ll fall in a crack in the earth and disappear forever,’” he says. “The one great thing about being in the military is it teaches you to overcome all of that, no matter what the odds are. I decided to just go.”

Within one month, Conti was working for Edlund, building models for the movie *Diehard*.

Conti had had lunch with a woman who worked in Edlund’s editorial department. She later mentioned to Edlund that Conti might be a good production assistant for him. At the time, Mark Stetson was the model shop supervisor (winning awards for *The Fifth Element* and *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Rings*). Coincidentally, Stetson’s wife had attended the University of Bridgeport, where Conti had gone to school. He was also from Red Bank, New Jersey, where Conti grew up.

Confusing, perhaps—but the connections had ensured that the deal was sealed.

As a hobby, Conti tinkered with computers. Realizing their capabilities, he was struck with an insight. He could use a fraction of the standard visual effects team (often only Conti and a computer) for a slice of the typical budget (no need to build all those models) and produce a top-quality product.

“In a short time, I became a forerunner of people knowing how to do computer graphics and computer animation. Later, that actually became my career,” he says.

Conti quickly accumulated a respectable list of movie and television credits including *Men in Black*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Kate and Leopold*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Stuart Little*, *Courage Under Fire*, *The Astronaut’s Wife*, *X-Files*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *SeaQuest DSV*.

As much success as he was achieving in Los Angeles, New Mexico beckoned his return. After seven years in L.A., Conti says that his “career had accelerated to this incredible peak, but I was tapped out. You’re always worried about getting your next job because you have a huge mortgage and all this stuff. I decided it was time to try to balance.”

The naysayers warned Conti he’d starve—this time for moving to Albuquerque. Instead, Conti says, “I got even more work by moving back! The whole film industry started moving here—so it was actually catching up with me. But the real goal is to be a full-time producer of my own product. I started taking less visual work and moving toward how to create a company that makes and distributes films, making money with those films.”

Conti’s first product—and favorite project ever—is *Army of the Dead*, released in 2008. He conceived the idea, hired a writer for the script, and directed and produced the film entirely in New Mexico with a group of students.

“I got to be the teacher I never had in film school, working with students who reminded me of me when I saw *Star Wars*: optimistic, enthusiastic, and wanting to do a good job,” he says. “It truly was one of the most rewarding experiences of my film career.”

Conti now lives in an energy-efficient home in Rio Rancho mere minutes from vast, open space. And he’s not taking it for granted.

“I want to make my life positive adventures—watching the sunset, exploring a canyon, or traveling the world,” says Conti. “I came back specifically to give myself more freedom to do that. New Mexico is a really magical place in that it doesn’t take much to get out of the city, be in the middle of nowhere and experience the world.”

—By Sonya Ewan 



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