



PERSON OF INTEREST

Darren Collins

One of the only puppet manufacturers in the country plans to use his creations to fight the spread of AIDS in Africa.

By Krista Nightengale

Q: When you were 13, you joined your church's puppet team. Did you have any idea you'd be doing this for the rest of your life?

A: When I was a teenager, my father and I would watch *An Evening at the Improv* every night on A&E. And we would always record the very last performer on that television show was a juggler, a puppeteer, a magician, or a prop comic. My dad said, "You can do that someday." I was the last of five children. They didn't care what my occupation was. I always had encouragement to do that. And watching the Muppet mov-

ies, my goal was to make millions of people happy, just like Kermit did.

Q: In 2009, you co-founded Puppets Inc., a puppet manufacturer in DeSoto. Are there other manufacturers in the area? How busy is the puppet business?

A: No, there aren't others in the area. There are really only three major puppet manufacturers in the country, and we are one of them. Business is actually tough right now because of the Chinese competitors. There are a lot of American companies that don't make them but instead order designs that are being manufactured. We're one of the very last remaining American-based companies.

Q: What type of puppets do you manufacture?

A: The type is a rod-arm hand puppet. It's the kind that you would see in television commercials. It's not like marionettes, or sort of artistic shadow puppets, or Bunraku.

Q: Besides Puppets Inc., how do you make a living?

A: I'm a professional juggler who does content-based shows for schools. I'm working hard on an anti-bullying program to bring to American schools. It's something I can finance my other projects with. Talking to kids about how they treat one another from my own unique perspective is a big passion of mine.

It's financially a good idea and emotionally satisfying.

Q: You've used puppets to teach people in Cambodia about waterborne germs, and now you're headed to Africa to tackle AIDS. Why puppets for such a serious subject?

A: The unique thing about puppets, especially in Third World countries,

is that people listen really attentively, and puppets are allowed to say things that humans can't in public conversation. So it's kind of a natural step to take if you're going to teach education to use a dramatic character who isn't bound by the same social

rules as people are.

Q: What are some things puppets say that humans can't?

A: I have a comedian friend here in Dallas. He's an African comedian. He said he wanted to bring puppets to Zambia because people really need to know about condom use. And it was funny because, as he was talking to me, he would look over his shoulder every time he said the word "condom." He said, "Excuse me, Darren. I know I say a lot of things onstage, but in private conversation, it's considered inappropriate in my culture to talk about this." And this is why I need to use puppets because puppets can do this.

Q: About a year ago, you put your possessions in storage, rented out your house in Waxahachie, and started living on the road. You're 34 and make a living with puppets. Is it hard getting dates?

A: No. It's not hard getting dates. The thing is, I was just about to get a loan to upgrade my house. And I thought, "What am I doing? This is a never-ending pursuit, having nice things and wanting more things. I need to see what I really want in my life." I think women find that attractive. If a girl can get past the fact that I'm homeless, living out of my car, and a puppeteer and a juggler by trade, that is so many filters, this is going to be an awesome person. **D**

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