



GIVE 'ER A HAND

Those foul-mouthed puppets from Avenue Q have got nothin' on Anna Paniccia's creature creations

Anna Paniccia's career in puppeteering began with a woolly mammoth—a 6-foot woolly mammoth constructed for her high school's theater department. And even though traditional acting was her first love, she came to appreciate the different approach to performing that puppets required. "Some actors have trouble with putting all the life into their hand," she says. "You're still acting, but with your hand instead of your body. In a way, part of you gets cut off, but in a way, more goes in there because puppets can say things that people can't."

Now the 23-year-old Webster University acting student is designing handheld creations for both school projects and beyond. She got a helping hand—of sorts—from an internship at Puppet Heap, a New York company noted for its work on Nickelodeon's *Bear in the Big Blue House*. There, she says, she learned all the "tricks" of the craft. "I wouldn't be where I am or doing what I do if it hadn't been for them," she says.

Paniccia has designed everything from sunflowers in flowerpots to fairy-tale goblins to clothes-wearing humans. But her favorite kind of puppet to develop? "I love doing them all, but the ones you can just go wild with are more fun," she says. With that in mind, she gave us a look at what went into one of her latest creations for the Internet production, *Puppet: The Show*. —Sarah Truckey



MARGOT THE KITTY KAT: "She's a frazzled, tired kitty cat who only speaks in meows and random words. She can't find work and doesn't have many friends because of her speech impediment."

➔ When commissioned to do a show, Paniccia will often receive a character blurb—like this one for Margot the Kitty Kat—and then begin "doodling," using the descriptions as guidance. Once the creators and producers have seen the rough sketches, they make their comments and send them back to her for further work. "They say, 'Oh, I love this aspect, I don't like this aspect, I want this one and this one, but can you bring in this?'" she explains. "So then I do more sketches, and I come back with ones that are nicer."

➔ Paniccia's preferred materials include feathers, corrugated plastic, glass eyes found on a taxidermy website, felt, those green straws they use at Starbucks and salad tongs—you know, all the things you'd think about using when constructing a puppet. "My friends make fun of me all the time because I stick eyeballs on my printer or on the fan or on the toaster in my apartment," she says. "As soon as you stick eyes on it, it comes to life. Even though puppets are toys and dolls, people can still connect with them, and they're still able to convey a heart and emotion."



PUPPET PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY BERNIE PANICCIA

PRETTY GUTSY for GRANDPARENTS

As the economy still sorts itself out, a lot of people are worried about retirement—us twentysomethings included. So when we heard about all the fun our elders will have at the Jewish Community Center's 28th annual St. Louis Senior Olympics, it gave us some hope for the future, even in the face of looming fiscal ruin. This Memorial Day weekend,

hundreds of "old birds" over the age of 50 will strut like spring chickens, packing so much action into four days that we know it'll put us cubicle-dwelling, beer-swilling young-uns to shame.

Yes, some will be playing shuffleboard, as well as such stereotypically "senior" games as bocce, billiards and croquet. But they'll also be slide-tackling each other in soccer, hurling high-speed

projectiles on the softball diamond and executing spectacular diving saves on the volleyball court, not to mention competing in four of the most dangerous track events we remember from high school: shot put, discus, javelin and pole vault.

Heck, we may be half their age, but most days it's tough to summon motivation for a walk around the block, much less a visit

to the gym. Our daily exercise often consists of walking to and from the parking lot. And while our spry elders are knocking down bowling records at the local Olympics, we're more likely to be knocking back drinks at Pin-Up Bowl.

In the dusk of their lives, our clean-living parents may be leaving us in the dust. —Margaret Bauer

