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SATURDAY SIX

WALT DISNEY WORLD (FL)

Disney-MGM Studio's Walt Disney Animation Florida Reunion

 Derek Burgan  March 18, 2026  1 Comment

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On March 7th, former Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida animators, staff, and their families held a reunion in Orlando.

Readers of a certain age might remember Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida as the crew inside the “fish bowl” of what was then Disney-MGM Studios. From 1989 to 2004 millions of guests toured **The Magic of Disney Animation** attraction. On the other side of the large glass windows, the animation crew was creating animated features and shorts that would soon be on movie screens worldwide (including *Lilo & Stitch*, *Mulan*, and *Brother Bear*.)



What a guest would see when looking inside the “fish bowl”. The Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida studio. (photo by @bioreconstruct)



Photo taken from inside "the fish bowl." Note the Disney-MGM guests in the background. (photo by @bioreconstruct)



Guests used to look down at the artists here. (photo by @bioreconstruct)

Working in this building was very special. Everyone knew everyone as great friends. The crew was mostly young and was sharing similar life experiences. They got married. They bought houses near each other in several of the Orlando neighborhoods. Their families grew, and their children also knew each other as great friends in school. There also were tragedies of spouses and colleagues becoming gravely ill and grief shared throughout the studio.

The Orange County Regional History Center also held a separate panel featuring former members of the animation crew on March 8. During the panel, *Mulan* co-director Barry Cook shared that while working at Disney-MGM that he was like toast in the morning: popping up and heading eagerly to the studio to work. It was a common feeling in the crew, as they could not wait to get back to

their desks in the morning, and often after working as long as possible into the night creating animation magic.



Barry Cook and Dominic Carola in the Orange County Regional History Center panel on the Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida studio.

The Florida animation crew would commonly go to dinner and enjoy theme park attractions with each other on weekends. Longtime attraction Cast Members probably remember the Kissimmee bar, The Big Bamboo Lounge and the animation crew commonly met at what they affectionately called “The Boo” to enjoy each other’s friendship, celebrate birthdays, anniversaries and more. One such event would be when a new crew member had reached their 1-year anniversary with the Studio and had been awarded an animation jacket. One of these jackets is currently on display in the OCRHC.



A 1-year Walt Disney Feature Animation jacket. On display at the Orange County Regional History Center.

Collaboration was common in the excitement of making the best animation possible. Animators would consult and look over each other's work while offering suggestions on how to make the scene better. During the OCHRC panel, Aaron Blaise (director of *Brother Bear*) told a story of working on *Mulan* with Alex Kuperschmidt (the lead animator for Stitch in *Lilo & Stitch*). Aaron had asked Alex to review a scene he had in progress. You might remember early in the film *Mulan* where there was a scene that had the dragon Mushu telling Mulan that men **punch each other in friendship**. Yao, a character who was quick to anger, was punched by Mulan into accidentally striking another male character, *hard*! Alex saw Aaron's animation in progress and said, "Yao loved hitting so much that he probably would kiss his hand in affection after that punch." Aaron lit up, what a great idea, and hurriedly added this to a later scene. This collaboration is in the movie.



Dominic Carola and Aaron Blaise in the Orange County Regional History Center panel on the Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida studio.

It shouldn't be a surprise that the reunion had the immediate resumption of conversations among friends. Barry Cook in the OCRHC panel said it was as if he had been in people's office just yesterday. Early in the reunion Mary-Kay Haseley, former Vice President and head of the Florida animation studio said that "tonight we are all in our 20's and 30's again."



Mary-Kay Haseley speaking to the Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida reunion before a screening of Mulan.

Many of the reunion attendees traveled from across the country: including Los Angeles, Seattle, and Chicago among other cities as well. Several families caught up with each other on a cruise in the days prior. Over the decades since the Florida animation department was closed, crew members had remarried, or are with new partners, and the new spouses/partners were curious to meet the Florida animation personalities they had heard so much about from over the years. Children, now adults, were also at the reunion to see the honorary uncles and aunts they fondly remembered growing up around from decades ago.

Many of the crew had not seen each other in over two decades. The second Golden Era of Disney animation spawned competition with new companies emerging in the 1990s. DreamWorks Animation, Sony animation, Warner

Brothers animation, Blue Sky, Pixar (which was not yet part of Disney) and more. These new companies offered opportunities for career growth and bigger salaries, but all the crew members who had left were welcomed back at the reunion with warm hugs by their still longtime friends, eager to hear what has happened in the past decades.



Some of the 230 attendees of the Disney Feature Animation Florida reunion. The reunion spilled into a lounge out of frame at left, and into the pool deck past the windows.

The full story of the Florida studio is told brilliantly in Mary Lescher's book, [The Disney Animation Renaissance: Behind the Glass at the Florida Studio](#).

There is also a documentary about the Florida studio titled [Beyond The Glass: The WDW Animation Building](#) as well as a heart-felt artist's documentary about the 1990's Golden Era of Disney Animation, named [Dream On Silly Dreamer](#).

A remarkably common topic during the reunion was remote work. Variations included how the Florida studio was doing remote work long before it became the norm. The crew at Disney-MGM would work remote from Feature Animation in Burbank/Glendale, with video conferences to discuss animation progress. Very similar to the Teams, Zoom, and other video conferencing that is routine in post-pandemic remote work. A common observation at the reunion was that when the world switched to remote work, everyone involved already knew what it was like after the years of being remote from Burbank.



Video conferencing before it became en vogue. Seen here, 20 years before the pandemic.

Much of the Florida animation crew is still involved in Creative Work, although many have retired or are contemplating retirement. Nearly everyone has had career growth, and in unexpected ways. Pam Coats was the producer of *Mulan*,

and later Vice President of Creative Affairs at Disney. Pam said in the OCRHC panel that she has always admired the resiliency of the Florida crew and the crew's ability to reinvent itself and succeed. Stories of success continued to be shared well into the night.



The Orange County Regional History Center panel. Left to right, Katie Kelley, the host. Pam Coats, Barry Cook, Dominic Carola, and Aaron Blaise.

As part of the Walt Disney Feature Animation reunion festivities, a special screening of *Mulan* was held at Epic Theaters in Orlando.



Just as in the theme park food blogging world, *the camera always eats first.*



About the Author: **Bioreconstruct** worked at Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida from the April 1989 setup to the final weeks of the teardown in summer 2004. Some of his work includes effects like rice paper as the background of the opening of *Mulan*, importing the monster movie scene into *Lilo and Stitch*, and the track seen in the Roger Rabbit short **Roller Coaster Rabbit**. Today he is known for chartered helicopter aerial photos of Orlando theme park construction.



Feb 27, 2026 aerial photo of the former Florida studio. About 70 artists staffed the building in April 1989, ahead of the May grand opening of the Disney-MGM Studios theme park. The studio grew steadily into trailers, and then expanded into the 4-story building at right. (photo by @bioreconstruct)

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