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CSCL ANIMATION CAMPS CONNECT YOUTH TO TECHNOLOGY

FOX CHAPEL, PA – Chris Wilmer's animation students may someday create an Academy Award-winning film – if they start early enough.

That's one of the goals of Wilmer's annual free summer camps at Cooper-Siegel Community Library (CSCL). This year, Wilmer hosted two weeks of beginner and advanced computer animation camps, sponsored by a donation from the Natali Family Foundation.

"In both camps, we use the free and open-source software, Blender, to make a variety of images and animations throughout the week," Wilmer said. "Blender is not a 'kids' program.' It's used by professionals across a variety of industries, and this year, the movie 'Flow' won the Oscar for Best Animated Movie – and it was made in Blender."

In beginner animation camp, students learn the program's basics and make "pancake monsters," which are then 3D printed at the library for students to keep. They then learn to animate using physics simulations, including making movies of domino towers getting knocked over.

"It's a hit every year for the kids," Wilmer said. "In the advanced camp, we focus on more advanced animation and production techniques. Students learn how to animate objects with many interconnected parts – gears, hinges, pulleys, pistons – which we use to create and animate some simple robots."

Advanced campers also learned how to make photorealistic renders with regards to lighting and texturing objects; studied more sophisticated object interactions through physics simulations; and animated destructible buildings and furniture.

CSCL Technical Services Department Head and Teen Librarian Brad Wulfkuhle, who oversees the camp's 3D printing, said Wilmer's "passion for Blender and computer animation" shines through during camp.

"Chris is great. For a teacher that is normally instructing college students, he is able to pivot and teach younger children how to use a program that is challenging for them," Wulfkuhle said. "It shows his patience and knowledge as an educator. It's exciting to me watching these kids learn a program where they can be creative and make something unique to their personalities. It's amazing what they produce after only a week of camp."

Wilmer, a Fox Chapel resident and Toronto, Canada, native, started offering two-day animation workshops at CSCL in 2021, before transitioning to week-long camps the following year with help from his son and fellow animator, William Winerock, 11.

"William first acted as my assistant instructor at 7-years-old, and he's been in that role ever since. He's been animating for seven years now and even has his own website where he posts some of his animations," Wilmer said. "When he first started using Blender at age four, I realized that young children

were able to pick up this extremely complicated animation software more easily than I would have guessed. When he turned six, I looked around to see if there were any animation camps already out there, and the options seemed very limited, so I started my own. Additionally, I want to be an active member of my community, and this is one way I can contribute."

Wilmer, who holds a Ph.D., works as a chemical engineering professor at the University of Pittsburgh in a lab that designs noses for robots. He's been teaching graduate students scientific visualization for over 10 years. His native language is Polish, and he enjoys exploring Pittsburgh with his wife, dance historian Emily Winerock.

Initially, Wilmer said, he only wanted the CSCL camps to focus on Blender and animation, but added computer literacy concepts to his lessons when he noticed younger generations are "less familiar with computers than their parents are" from growing up using tablets and iPads.

"We've somehow gone backwards in digital literacy. I routinely get undergraduate engineering students that aren't familiar with file systems and struggle with using computers," Wilmer said. "An unexpected benefit of these animation camps is that students are learning to use 'real' computers, which is important preparation for doing important work later in their lives."

As for his favorite part of camp, Wilmer said he enjoys the "pancake monster" project, because they display his students' creativity.

"They tend to look equally cute and terrifying, but each has their own unique personality," he said. "Each monster is made from just combining spheres and cones in different ways, and, in the process, students learn how to make interesting, complex creatures from simple shapes."

Registration for CSCL's animation camps opens in the spring, and Wulfkuhle said spots fill up quickly.

"Any kid that signs up will be able to use Blender to learn something awesome that they can continue to build on as they get older," Wulfkuhle said. "The camps can definitely be a creative outlet for any kid at any skill level."

To view animations created at CSCL's 2025 camps, visit https://youtu.be/iN8Q3HHUaUI or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP3adx1_Qwk. To learn more about Wilmer's work, visit www.wilmerlab.com.

For more information about Cooper-Siegel Community Library, including upcoming programming, visit www.coopersiegelcommunitylibrary.org.

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