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"Team Marco Polo" host Jonathan Wright plays other characters, including Professor Bombast. ()

'Marco Polo' helps kids discover the joys of travel

Learning about the world is cool

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

When William Jeakle, co-creator of "Bill Nye the Science Guy," took his family to London a couple years ago, his young children wanted to stay in the hotel and watch "The Simpsons" instead of going sightseeing.

There was no basis for his three kids to understand why it was so cool to be overseas, Jeakle said.

"There wasn't really anything that taught the culture, history and excitement of travel for kids," he said. "American kids can get by without knowing much about the rest of the world."

This realization inspired him to create "Team Marco Polo," a children's show that combines the intelligent humor of "Bill Nye" and the cultural adventure of Rick Steves.

The show, which will be distributed through a variety of media, including DVD, iTunes and Facebook in the fall, has short clips available online, including new one-minute clips being introduced daily on YouTube, starting Tuesday.

Jeakle was a developer at CNN before moving to Seattle in 1990 to help develop "Bill Nye the Science Guy." He also played a "High-Five'n White Guy" on "Almost Live!" and helped launch the Seattle-based corporate media firm Filmateria Studios. When "Team Marco Polo" came about, Jeakle was ready to make another show.

With the help of "Bill Nye" head writer Scott Schaefer, Jeakle has put together a witty children's travel show with a fast pace reminiscent of the "The Monkees." The host, Marco Polo, played by local children's theater

actor Jonathan Wright, is joined by an array of other characters, including historian Professor Bombast, art expert Sister Windy -- both played by Wright -- and travel guide Steve Ricks, a parody of Steves played by Seattle improvisational actor Ethan Newberry.

Four shows have been filmed so far -- two in London and two in Paris -- and 22 more episodes are planned. "Team Marco Polo" aims to teach children about history and culture through art, vocabulary, dining habits and anything else that might resonate with young people. In one episode there's a "Paris Idol" segment in which kids judge Louis Pasteur, the Lumiere brothers and Voltaire on who is the coolest historical figure.

"It's a fun way to introduce kids from age 5 to 12 to more high-concept things," Jeakle said.

Jeakle's own children -- Matt, 13, Siena, 11, and Gabi, 8 -- are featured in the show performing skits and giving their father critical feedback. They have traveled to London and Paris and are bringing their own travel knowledge to the audience.

"People are different in some ways and in a lot of ways they're the same," second-grader Gabi said. "There are a lot of similarities between kids in Paris and kids in America."

Gabi and Siena both introduced the show to their classmates and garnered rave reviews.

"It really makes you laugh, it's really clever," Siena said. "It's funny and it's educational and you don't even notice."

To promote the program, Wright visited Westlake Center in December and interacted with the public, discussing European holiday traditions and asking people what they know about culture.

"He's willing to put on a 12th-century explorer suit and go anywhere," Jeakle said of Wright.

Wright also got people to "hug a historical figure" and join him in "Marco Polo's Super Awesome 21st Century Santa Claus Dance." His exploits are posted on YouTube.

"It was definitely a great experience" Wright said, "and, hopefully, we'll be doing more of that."

In an increasingly globalized world, those involved in "Team Marco Polo" hope the program will open children's eyes to world culture.

"It just seems like kids are taught to be afraid of travel," Wright said, noting the prevalence of war and international conflict in media reportage. "I'd love for kids ... to get some sense of how diverse the world is and traditions other than their own. It's a small world, and we're all pretty similar."

WATCH IT

- For more on "Team Marco Polo," visit teammarcopolo.com.
- Find promotional clips and show teasers at youtube.com/teammarcopolo.

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