

PARENTING

'Veggie Tales' offer families feast of faith lessons

By Tricia Hempel
Catholic News Service

CHICAGO — In 1993, Ohio native Mike Nawrocki informed his mother he was shelving his lifelong plan to be a pediatrician.

For the woman who had just lovingly purchased a copy of *Gray's Anatomy* as a gift for the son in premed, it had to be difficult news to hear.

And Nawrocki was starting a career as a cucumber.

In his salad days at the University of Illinois, Nawrocki planned to attend medical school, but service to humanity in another form was beckoning. He applied to the Peace Corps, thinking he would teach biology in Africa. At the same time, Phil Vischer, a close friend and fellow puppeteer from his days at St. Paul Bible College, pursued with Nawrocki his idea of producing quality children's videos with religious messages.

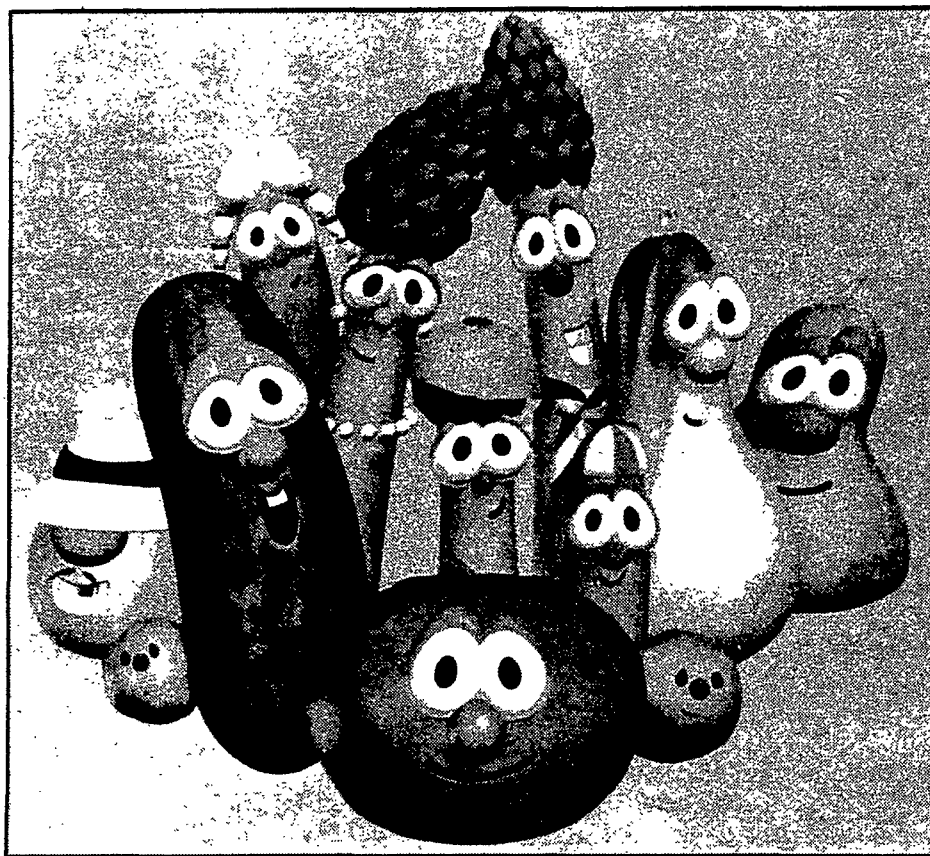
Financially, Vischer was struggling, but friends and family members were willing to invest nest eggs, college funds and money set aside for retirement because they believed in his vision. Could they make it work? The call was too loud for Nawrocki to ignore.

That year, his role as the voice of Larry the Cucumber in the children's video "Where's God When I'm Scared?" earned him a place in the hearts of many a child who sees monsters under the bed.

Six years later, he is writer, director and co-creator of Big Idea's "Veggie Tales," one of the fastest growing line of children's videos on the market. And, Nawrocki told *The Catholic Telegraph*, newspaper of the Cincinnati Archdiocese, he knows that "what I'm doing is going to make a difference."

Until last year, main characters Larry the Cucumber and Bob the Tomato (Vischer) and their "Veggie Tales" stories like "Dave and the Giant Pickle," and "Josh and the Big Wall" were only available at Christian booksellers, but today the lovable mugs of Bob the Tomato, Larry the Cucumber and Junior Asparagus beam out from boxes lining the shelves at K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Target and Kroger.

As Vischer has explained, "Veggie Tales" were not created as a substitute for Sunday school or formal religious educa-



tion, but rather, as an alternative to Saturday morning cartoons. Big Idea, based in the Chicago area, does not consider itself to be a Christian media company, but rather, a media company with a Christian view.

To date, more than 6 million "Veggie Tales" videos have been sold.

Nawrocki emphasizes that the audio and video materials espouse no specific theology, but simply use Bible verses and stories and references to God. An education professor from Illinois' Wheaton College advises the company on content, and all of the merchandise that has spun off from the success of the video is intended to point the kids back to the stories, he said.

"From the outset, what we wanted to do was make a difference with kids, change kids' lives. Bob and Larry are friends to these kids," Nawrocki said.

Bob and Larry conclude each episode with the tag line, "Remember kids, God made you special and He loves you very much."

There are a dozen videos — including "The Gourds Must Be Crazy," an offbeat Trekkie version of the story of Zaccheus the tax collector; and "Rack, Shack and Benny," which places the Book of Daniel's characters of Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego into more modern circumstances, when they refuse to worship the giant chocolate bunny erected by their boss, Mr. Nebby K. Nezzar. The story of Jonah and the whale is in current production and possibly could mushroom into Big Idea's first feature-length theatrical release.

There are also educational materials, including a "Veggie Town Values" kit for use in vacation Bible camps or summer Sunday schools and adaptable for tots, kids or teens.

"This is a gentle, noncontroversial media," said Bob Patin, who left the corporate world for a full-time job assisting CEO Vischer. "We found a formula, a way to hook parents and kids together — family units that have learning to do together. We don't want to get into the edges of

the theology debates."

Big Idea's mission statement says a lot about the people who started the company as well as about those who come to work there. It notes that "irresponsible use" of TV, film, music, video games and other forms of popular media "has had a profoundly negative impact on America's moral and spiritual health."

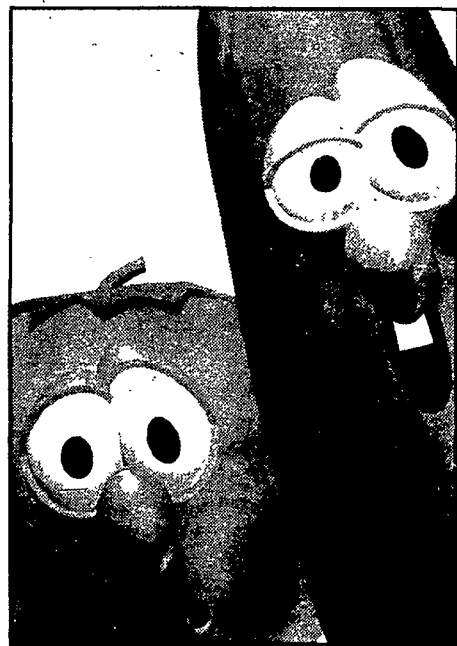
But, it says, responsible use of these mediums "can have an equally positive impact. The best way to improve people's lives is to promote biblical values and encourage spiritual growth."

It adds that the world "desperately needs a media company that is out to make a difference" instead of a buck.

At Big Idea "we believe people have a powerful need to integrate their minds, hearts and souls," Patin said. "We want to create the most trusted family entertainment company. I hope to prove that these themes, these cultural foundations, are absolutely consistent with great business."

But there's still one burning question: Why vegetables? Is it because every child, regardless of race or ethnic heritage, can identify with them? Or because they are so often the underdogs on most kids' menus of choice?

"That's a great thought," said Nawrocki, looking embarrassed. "But actually, we chose vegetables because they were the easiest things for us to animate."



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☉ **THRU AUG. 31** — Registration for children's fall programs: Helen McGraw Branch, Irondequoit Public Library, 2180 E. Ridge Rd., Irondequoit: 716/336-6060.

☉ **FRI, AUG. 20** — Campfire Tales: for all ages, 8-9:30 p.m., Mendon Ponds Park Nature Center, 3914 Clover St., Honeoye Falls, \$2 per individual, \$6 per family; bring blankets, own snack; 716/334-3780.

☉ **AUG. 20-22** — Seneca Lake Whale Watch: with music, storytelling, puppets, hay maze, martial arts demonstrations, crafts, etc.; Lakeshore Park, Routes 5 & 20, Geneva; 5-11 p.m. Fri., 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Sat., noon-7 p.m. Sun.; \$5 general admission, \$1 children under 12; \$10 three-day pass.

☉ **AUG. 21, 28** — Guided nature walks: 11 a.m. and 2 p.m.; Cumming Nature Center, Gulick Road, South

Events

Bristol; free with center entry of \$1.50 for students K-12, free for preschoolers, \$3 for senior citizens 62 and older, \$4 for adults; for more information call 716/374-6160.

☉ **SAT, AUG. 21** — Kids Fishing Derby: for ages 14 and younger; Canandaigua City Pier; 7 a.m.; prizes given for heaviest fish, most fish, longest fish, heaviest carp; bring own equipment, free bait available for participants (while supply lasts); sponsored by Canandaigua Lions Club.

☉ **SUN, AUG. 22** — Wildflower nature walk: 10 a.m.; meet at Gardens overlook, Letchworth State park, Castile; free; for more information, call 716/493-3625.

☉ **AUG. 22** — Wegmans Children's Day at the Beach; afternoon concerts; Ontario Beach Park

at Lake and Beach avenues, Charlotte; 1-7 p.m.; for more information, call 716/865-3320.

☉ **SUN, AUG. 22** — Class for children over 5 to prepare for the arrival of a new baby; Park Ridge Hospital, 1555 Long Pond Rd., Rochester; 1 p.m.-5 p.m.; to register call 716/464-3305.

☉ **AUG. 22-28** — Family camp; for single parents and their children; sponsored by Camp Stella Maria on Conesus Lake and Beginning Experience of Rochester; call Liz or Steve Wascak, 716/492-5558 or Camp Stella Maria, 716/346-2243.

☉ **SAT, AUG. 28** — History Day at Fort Schuyler; reenactors demonstrating 18th century weapons, trade goods, clothing, cooking, camping; 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m.; presentations at 10:30 a.m. and 1 p.m.; Ellison Park, Monroe County; \$2 for individuals, \$5 for families; call 716/256-4956.



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