

Hug 'em, squeeze 'em, just don't kick 'em

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

Ookpik pretends to be very scared when Jonathon Atkinson, 8, wacks her on the chest.

Ookpik, the puffin-like symbol of Richmond Hill's winter carnival, has all the mascot moves — waving, covering enormous eyes with her thickly-gloved hands, wiggling her butt around.

Ookpik even shows off her macarena for some children in a Markham parkette.

Soon afterward, Ookpik falls back on the grass exhausted, and she couldn't get up on her own.

"You probably sweat out 20 pounds," said Jill Desnoyer, the veterinarian clinic volunteer who emerges from the costume.

Mascots walk among us, shuffling into our classrooms, picnics and civic festivals. Their work is in all cases important. But do we spare a thought for the person inside, breathing through mesh?

"Doctor Bear is sweatin' buckets," reported Magda Rigo, community resources director at Markham Stouffville Hospital, where Doctor Bear eases the anxieties of children awaiting surgery. "He might be his own first patient."

RIDICULOUS FEET

Playing Ozzie the Environmental Services Owl isn't much easier.

"It's just like wearing a really hairy sweatshirt," Devon Hutchinson, a Town of Markham summer student, said of her first experience inside Ozzie.

Earlier, she needed a helper to walk in Ozzie's oversized shoes. "Because I can't go on my own. These feet are ridiculous."

Eight mascots — the Block Parent Block Puppy, Chuckleberry from Stouffville's strawberry festival, Doctor Bear, the Markham Fair's Faircrow, Markham's Millennium Mark, Ookpik, Ozzie and Yorkie from the United Way of York Region — came to the parkette one afternoon, and neighbourhood children were thrilled.

"They're funny," Jonathon said. "They're cuddly and they're soft."

"All of them I liked," said Karly Nagel, 6, who had been tickling Ookpik's feet.

Kids older than Grade 5 might punch mascots, but younger kids like them, added Jonathon's brother Christopher Atkinson, 10.

His friend Dylan Findlay, 9, poked Chuckleberry, a round, wide-smiling fruit with hands where its ears might be.

Creator Vivian Black reinforced Chuckleberry when, experiencing heat and children's hugs the first time out, it got a little squashed. "They would hug it and it would



STAFF PHOTOS/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

York Region mascots gathered with neighbourhood kids to strut their stuff and test their routines.

start collapsing," she said.

Black, a former head of costumes for Toronto's Santa Claus Parade, likes to give her mascots the best field of vision and movement possible. Nothing destroys the illusion more, she said, than seeing a mascot being led by a handler.

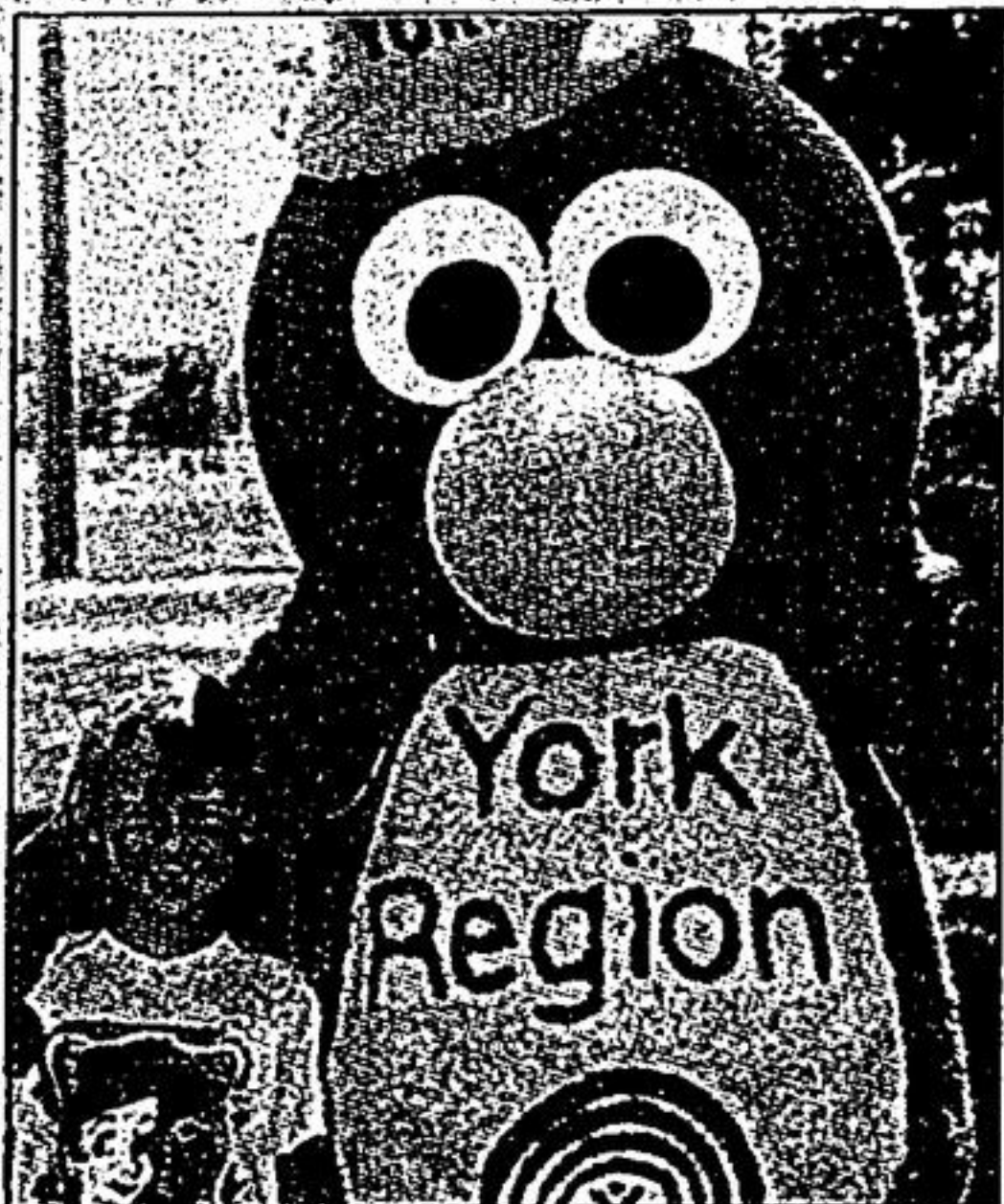
Black's Richmond Hill company, Storybox Productions, also designed the town's new Linton the Lion (a possible masterpiece) as well as Lucky Duck, the bright-orange mascot who appears at countless City of Vaughan happenings.

The city's special events coordinator Heather Heagle, who hangs Lucky on her office coat rack, recited his job description:

"He has to be happy, he can't speak and he hands things out," Heagle said. "And he has to be happy!"



Christopher Atkinson, 10, with Ookpik, Richmond Hill winter carnival mascot.



Karly Nagel, 6, with York Region United Way mascot Yorkie.



Tanner Nagel, 8, with Dr. Bear of the Markham Stouffville Hospital.

Doctor Bear has helped the hospital for 10 years, often with a real doctor inside. Before that, there was Doctor Roo, a kangaroo mascot who proved hard to handle, Rigo said. "He had a big tail that knocked people over."

Yorkie, described as "Elmo (of Sesame Street fame) with a hat", was created 11 years ago, said Sue Wookey, a United Way campaign assistant.

"They wanted him to look something like this," she added, presenting a small, googly-eyed pom-pom — a thing you'd see stuck to someone's computer. "He's not supposed to be any particular animal."

Faircrow, which has a working fan in his head, is a 12-year-old ambassador for Markham's largest fall event.

"The scarecrow has been a guardian of agriculture," David Morrison, the fair's general manager, said. "There's several other mascots in the form of animals, cows and pigs. We wanted something unique."

Ozzie, which helps teach children environmental lessons, can be quite expressive with his wings but seems restricted in his lower body.

FROM ANOTHER PLANET

"The belly is around my legs," Hutchinson complained. To make the heavy costume bearable, Hutchinson as Ozzie wears a cooling vest underneath in which water chilled the night before is pumped through plastic tubes.

Block Puppy is used in schools by Block Parents in Markham and Unionville to promote children's safety. "It just grabs their attention a little bit more," said Marianne MacBride.

Millennium Mark, looking like a four-fingered lion in a Flash Gordon suit, is harder to explain. "I think he's come from another planet and he's helping us celebrate the new millennium," said handler Nicole Carter, a summer student on the Markham 2000 Committee.

A mascot is partly entertainment, partly a method of reaching a particular public, said Keith Thirgood of Markham's Capstone Communications Group, which has designed half a dozen mascots.

Thirgood and partner Helen Walter designed Milliken Millie, a millipede making its debut at the Milliken Children's Festival in Markham next month.

In designing Millie, he said, Capstone had to consider the ages and cultures of children who might have to make sense of it.

"It's not just a matter of asking 'What would be cool?'" Thirgood said. "We have to have it do its job representing the organization."

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