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In Disney's world



Naples native Demetri Vardoulas, 12, right, plays a game of pool with his younger brother Alex, 6, in Naples on Aug. 19. Vardoulas portrays a young Walt Disney in the new film "Wait Before Mickey."

SCOTT MCINTYRE/STAFF

■ North Naples kid portrays young Walt Disney in new film

By Dave Osborn

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The two brothers took turns in an after-school game of billiards. The 12-year-old lined up a simple bank shot, pumping his cue stick slightly as it nudged the solid white ball.

Pool balls quietly clicked, moving slowly. Then the black eight ball fell into a pocket. Game over for Demetri Vardoulis, as 6-year-old brother Alex flashed a younger-sibling-just-won smile.

"Aw, that means I lost," Demetri said in a matter-of-fact, non-dejected way.

It was just another weekday afternoon for the quiet Pine Ridge Middle School seventh-grader who hardly behaves like a young movie star. Dressed in a pink polo shirt and navy pants, Demetri looks and acts typical, yet the child actor is racking up success beyond the classroom. He appeared last Sunday in an episode of the new HBO show "Ballers" that stars Dwayne Johnson.

Even bigger, Demetri plays a young Walt



“He’s a great kid and he’s fun to work with.”

Arthur L. Bernstein, executive producer of "Walt Before Mickey"

INSIDE

Read a Q&A with the movie's executive producers.

NEAPOLITAN, 1D

Disney in the new film "Walt Before Mickey" that premieres in Southwest Florida on Friday at Silverspot theater in Mercato, less than a mile from his North Naples home.

The film was shown earlier this month at Downtown Disney in Orlando, finishing third in attendance behind two nationally distributed films.

His mother, Karina Vardoulis, observed her sons playing pool in the spacious home in which they live in the Estates at Bay Colony Golf Club in Pelican Marsh.

She said Demetri has been on Pine Ridge Middle's honor roll for the past two years.

"He's very grounded," she said.

ALL-AMERICAN KID

A trip to Florida's east coast three years

See DISNEY, 7A

DISNEY from 1A

ago began for Demitri what could end up becoming a lifelong career. His mother said she and Demitri were traveling to Weston with her daughter, Sydney, to meet with acting coach Marjorie Morhaim. Her credentials include serving as a casting assistant for the popular TV shows "Miami Vice" and "21 Jump Street."

Karina Vardoulis said Morhaim gave Demitri some lines to memorize and he returned a week later, impressing her.

"He's got a great look. He looks like he could be anybody's child," Morhaim said.

"He fits into the all-American group of kids. He's a strong kid too, he's got a good head on his shoulders. Very likable."

Demitri auditioned for the Disney role in 2013, and spent two full days at a farm near DeLand — near Orlando — filming his scenes, his mom said.

"He's a great kid and he's fun to work with, along with other the kids," said Arthur L. Bernstein, a producer, writer and executive producer for "Walt Before Mickey."

"He had a tough task; he had to deal with the animals. Walt loved animals. He talked to the animals. Demitri was there with the pigs, the cows, the ducks."

Demitri said he enjoys acting and his favorite actor is Jim Carrey. His favorite Carrey film? The 1997 comedy "Liar Liar."

"Every time I watch him, he makes me laugh," Demitri said.

The youngster said it's not difficult for him to memorize scripts.

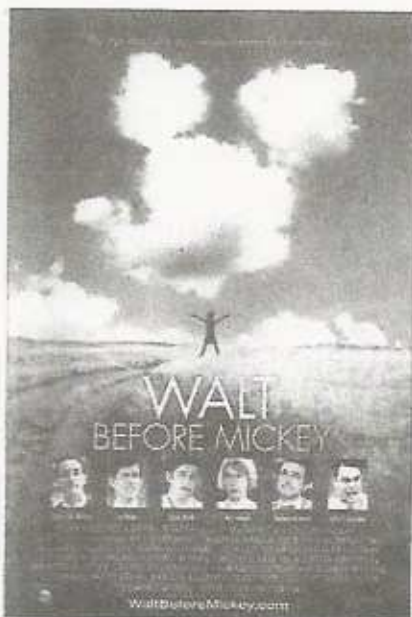
"I think the deal with it is you have less things to worry about as a kid," he said.

Demitri said he enjoys long hours on a movie set and the tedious process of making a movie.

"I love to play different characters," he said. "You can play a bad character, you can play a good character. You can do everything."

His mother acknowledged that she's aware of how many child actors later get into trouble with the law, substance abuse and more.

"You worry about all these things, but not just in the acting world," she said of raising children in general.



Demitri Vardoulis stars as a young Walt in "Walt Before Mickey."

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Subscribers can watch videos and see more photos of Demitri Vardoulis.

'STILL JUST A NORMAL PERSON'

Demitri said he's learning to adjust to his stardom.

When classmates learned he would be in a big-screen movie, "they gave me a little bit of a hard time," he said.

Then they found that he's the same old Demitri who enjoys school — especially physical education class.

"Sometimes a lot of people, at the beginning of the year, they'd ask me if I'm in a movie and I'd say, 'Yeah, but I'm still just a normal person,'" he said.

His mother told the story of how two theater workers recently recognized her son after they had just finished seeing the movie "Southpaw." She said the workers commented that they knew Demitri from the "Walt Before Mickey" trailer that has been playing in the theater.

Demitri's previous credits include parts in the films "An Unusual Meeting" and "The Life Exchange." Demitri also has appeared on "Ballers," a show about active and retired football players in Miami.

In "Ballers," he played the character Shawn in a scene last Sunday with J.D. Washington, Denzel Washington's son, who portrays a professional football player.

Demitri also will appear in the

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Bryan F. Davis, "Fallaway" director

short film "Star Child" that set to make the film festival circuit in 2016.

In "Walt Before Mickey," Demitri plays a young Walt Disney, growing up on a farm in Marceline, Missouri. One scene shows Demitri angering his dad for drawing a horse on a sketch pad. In another, he's using chalk to draw on the side of a barn.

Demitri said he enjoyed learning about Disney's past.

"Before I really didn't know of the struggles he faced," he said.

This fall, he will begin filming "Fallaway," a crime drama, in Southwest Florida. Similar to the 2004 Academy Award-winning movie "Crash," "Fallaway" follows five different story lines that include child abuse, sexual abuse and bullying, said Bryan F. Davis, "Fallaway" director.

Demitri's character is a young boy going through hardships, not only in family life but in school, Davis said.

He praised the young actor for always having his lines memorized and for showing great patience in doing numerous takes for a scene.

"Typically, when you're directing a child Demitri's age, it's not always a walk in the park," Davis said. "But he takes direction well. He's a phenomenal actor. He loves what he does."

"He's kind of an adult in a young man's body sometimes."

Morhaim said directors want young actors who can listen well and remain patient on a movie set for more than 10 hours, sometimes. Based on his acting resume so far, and if he continues to hone his craft, "I see the skies, the limit for him," she said.

"He's not one of those whiny kids, he's nothing of that sort," Morhaim said. "He's always a pleasure to work with. He's believable, he's natural, and those are all things that we look for."