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— Page 2D

# NORTHWEST ARKANSAS PROFILES

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Arkansas Democrat  Gazette

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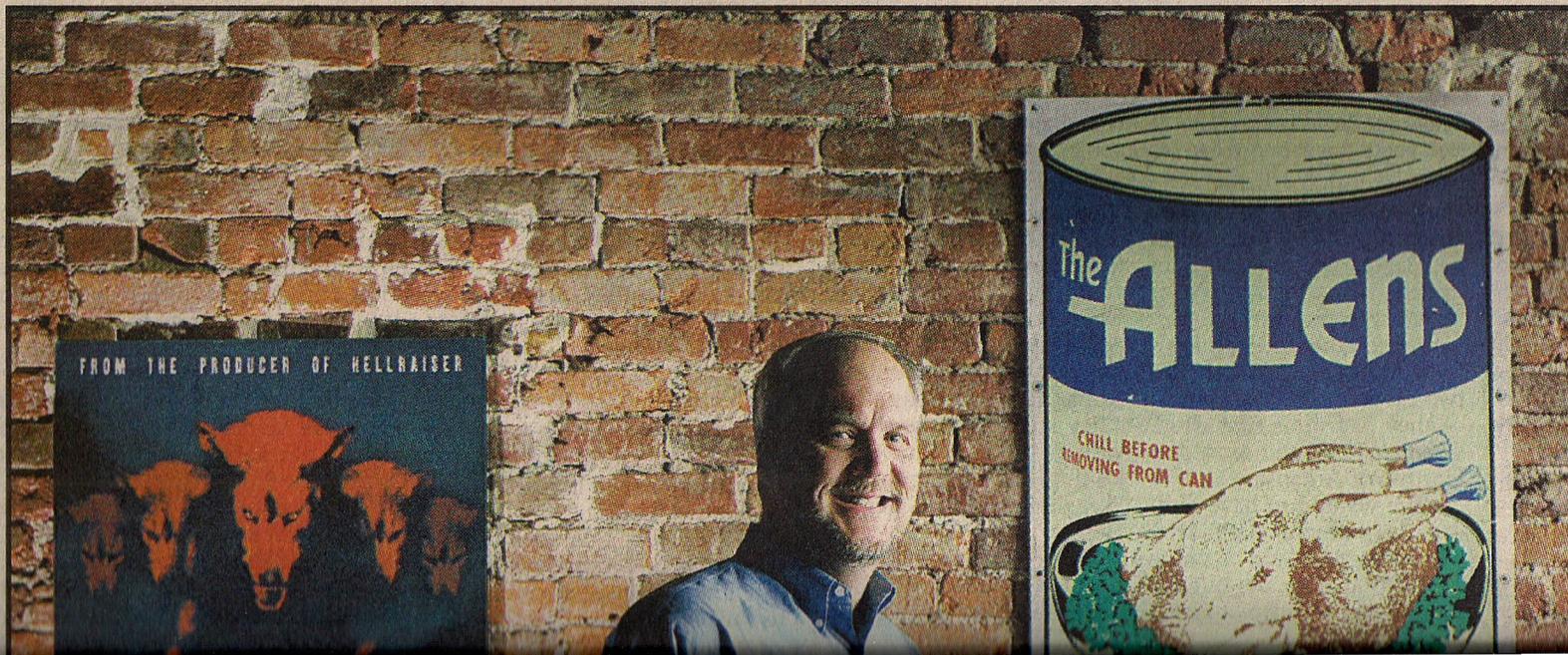
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SUNDAY, JULY 25, 2010

*David Earl Allen*

# Canny filmmaker

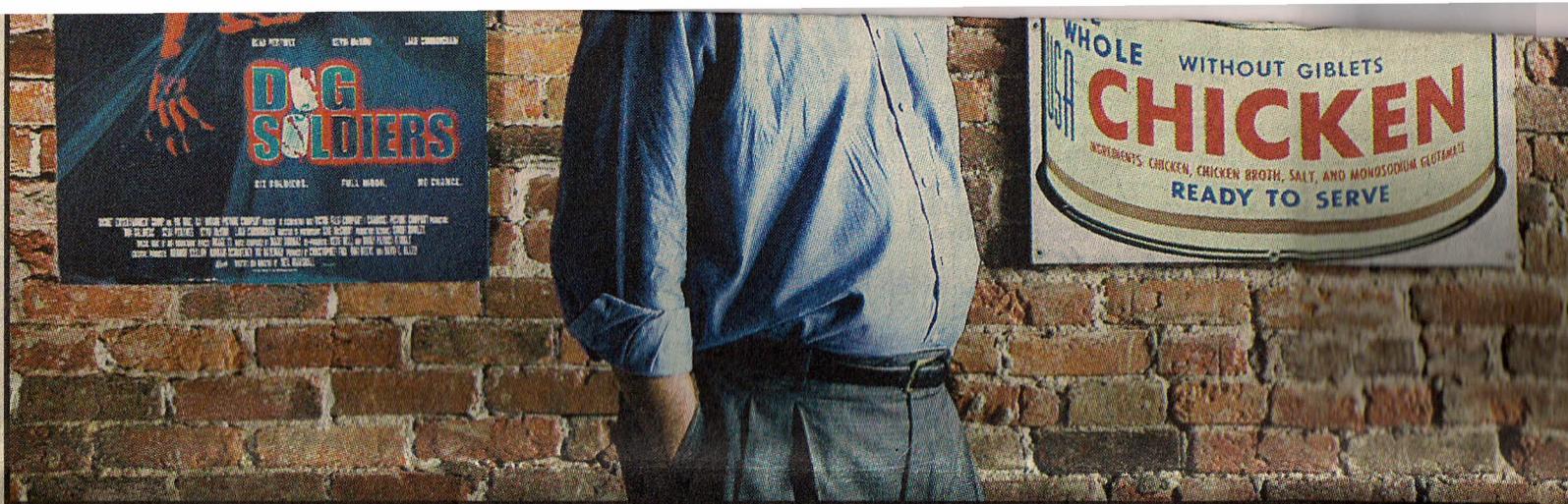
“I’m not  
always a  
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don’t go  
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I have  
a strong  
sense of  
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## SELF PORTRAIT

**Date and place of birth:** June 24, 1962, Siloam Springs  
**Occupation:** film producer, business owner and mayor of Siloam Springs  
**People who knew me in high school thought I was going to end up having my own stand-up comedy special on HBO.**  
**I want my children to remember only**

very  
gnizant  
of what  
think is  
best for  
the city.”



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/WILLIAM MOORE

**S**ILOAM SPRINGS — The venture-some David Allen is determined to reach success beyond that into which he was born.

The great-grandson of the founder of Allen Canning Co. (now Allens Inc.) in Siloam Springs opted out of the food processing business and took off for Hollywood, where he established himself as a film producer. But his roots pulled him back to Arkansas to serve as mayor of his hometown.

Allen's movies have featured marquee actors like Samuel L. Jackson, Milla Jovovich, the late Natasha Richardson, Dee Wallace and Gabrielle Union. His independent production and distribution company, Kismet Entertainment, has produced 10 films, and Allen also has a low-budget film company, Graveyard, that makes movies with budgets of \$1 million or less.

One of Allen's earliest and most enduring films, *Dog Soldiers*, became an international cult classic after its 2002 release. Allen hopes his next project will be a sequel to the werewolf flick and that someday he'll make a movie in Arkansas.

Acquaintances say he can be headstrong and outspoken; he has experienced a little luck and isn't afraid to take risks. He has developed savvy in one of the country's most cutthroat businesses but, in the process, strained his relationship with his wife and children.

At 48, he's now back home and busy with a different sort of production. This one stars

ROBIN MERO  
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

a family man wielding a gavel who is determined to balance personal and professional realms.

His lineage is what movies are made of. Allen's great-grandfather, Delbert Earl Allen, was a roundhouse foreman for the Santa Fe Railroad in New Mexico when, in 1922, a concerned doctor pointed him east toward famed healing waters in Northwest Arkansas. With five children piled in a Model T Ford, the family was almost to Eureka Springs when great-grandmother Shadye Allen announced she wasn't going any farther, and that the healing waters of Siloam Springs would be just fine.

Delbert Earl Allen founded Allen Canning Co. in 1926, just outside the city limits. David Allen's grandfather, Delbert Allen, took over leadership in the 1940s. The company canned products such as shoestring potatoes, green beans and baked beans, the last of which was a family recipe. They also supplied rations to troops overseas during World War II. Since David was his first grandchild, Delbert bestowed much of his "financial wizardry" on him, teaching him about stocks and money management and introducing him to the *Wall Street Journal*.

In the 1960s, Delbert had a stroke and Allen's father — also named Delbert but more commonly known by his middle name, "Pete" — quit college to run the company.

Pete reared his family in the country, on a cattle farm 10 miles east of Siloam Springs. As young as age 9, David Allen and his younger brother, Doug, spent summers working as a janitor's assistant at what is still known as the company's "country plant," east of town.

"We'd clean break rooms and restrooms. I eventually knew how to operate every piece of machinery in that plant," Allen says. Working on the line at age 11, his left hand became caught between a metal plate and conveyor belt on a labeling machine, leaving burn scars.

In 1972, Pete Allen took his sons to see the *Legend of Boggy Creek*, filmed in Fouke, Ark., and written, produced and directed by Charles B. Pierce. It was a defining moment.

"That movie scared the tar out of me," Allen says. "It was one of the first 'documentaries,' a documentary with dramatic and scary re-enactments. This film made me a lover of scary movies, and I think inspired me to later become a moviemaker. The film was a big envy of studios because of how little [Pierce] spent and how much he made."

David and Doug Allen rode the bus to and from school and were first to board and last to exit on the bumpy 1½-hour ride on dirt roads. That was when trouble would brew, because other kids perceived that the Allens were well off.

"Kids would beat the crap out of me ... A kid in second grade was always calling me 'moneybags.' My family built a big house on the hill — it was one of the bigger homes

See **ALLEN**, Page 4D

like advertising signs, celebrity autographs and lots of DVDs. I've been told I could open my own rental store. My favorite holiday is a tie between Christmas and Halloween. I love to give presents at Christmas, and I love to get scary and give out candy to the kids at Halloween.

If I've learned one thing in my life, it is common sense is rarely common, and we live and learn. If I could do it all over again, I'd have gone straight into the movie business. As a kid, I wanted to grow up to be Batman. The book I've been recommending lately is *The Manchurian President* by Aaron Klein. A personal hero has always been my dad. One goal I haven't achieved yet: To direct a feature film. One word to sum me up: passionate

# Mayor's road home took a Hollywood detour

• ALLEN, continued from 1D

around — but my parents borrowed the money like everyone else. We didn't feel affluent. If I wanted something from the Sears catalog I had to wait until Christmas or earn the money myself," Allen says.

Allen Canning expanded under his father's leadership, buying plants in Alma and Van Buren from oil tycoon H.L. Hunt, as well as a plant in Mississippi. In 1974, as automation emerged in the food industry, Pete Allen bought a hydrostatic cooker — one of three in the country. It was seven stories tall.

"All through the '60s, Dad struggled. By 1978, when we gained the Popeye brand, we finally started getting in the black," the son says. Allen Canning was the world's largest privately held food processor, and Pete Allen became chairman of the National Food Processors Association in 1983. "That year, we hit \$200 million in sales. I was so proud."

Throughout college at the University of Arkansas, David Allen worked for the company part time. After graduating in 1984 with a business degree, "I knew where my job was," he says. He took over as head of personnel management for the company.

"Actually, I never wanted to be in personnel, but I enjoyed being part of making a product, making sure the quality was there. I drove regularly to all the plants — in Mississippi, Louisiana,



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/WILLIAM MOORE

**Filmmaker and Siloam Springs Mayor David Allen shows off a prop from his movie *Dog Soldiers* to a class at Southside Elementary School.**

"I still have a goal of directing a film. I've bet on other people but I've never bet on myself. That is down the road for me, most certainly it's my next big step."

product, making quality was there. I drove regularly to all the plants — in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alma,” he says.

By 1990, Allen was serving as a vice president for personnel and public relations. He came under a lot of strain.

“I was 28, and I thought I was going to die. I had shingles from the stress. I became an investment advisor. Later, when I got in the movie business, I named my company Kismet. It means destiny, and if there was any time I was taking destiny into my hands it was leaving the family business,” Allen says. “I disappointed my father.”

When he left the family business behind, he wasn't the only one affected.

### DISCO DAVE

In junior high and high school, Allen had established himself as a class clown. His high school nickname was “Disco Dave.” The University of Arkansas — which had a reputation as a party school — sounded about right to him.

His first semester there he met his future wife, the former Stephanie Goode. He first spotted her in the dining room at Pomfret Hall, where they both lived.

“I had to wear her down. I begged and bugged her, and she finally went out with me,” Allen says. They dated a year. Allen bought a ring and presented it before Christmas 1981 atop one of his mom's Christmas cookies.

The couple settled in Siloam Springs and raised two sons, Eric and Tucker. Stephanie Allen was uneasy about her husband leaving Allen Canning. However, he prospered as an investment adviser. The boys were 13 and

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11 when Stephanie gave birth to the couple's only daughter, Emmy, in 1997.

The film bug in Allen started buzzing in 1998.

“I realized that, even if I kept managing money from a laptop in my hotel room at night, I could be on a movie set during the day,” he says.

He wrote three-page letters to two industry legends: Stephen King and Arkansas native John Grisham. At the time, King was working on *The Green Mile*, and Grisham was making *Runaway Jury*.

“I offered to work on the movies for free. I said, ‘I'll bring coffee. I can put up some money.’ I thought I could buy my way into being part of the crew.”

Allen never heard from Grisham, but King forwarded his letter to *The Green Mile* producer David Valdes. Two weeks later, he flew to Los Angeles and met for two hours with Valdes and the movie's director, Frank Darabont.

“They said with my background I didn't need to be bringing coffee; I needed to be making movies. I took a lot of notes. Valdes had scripts for me to read,” Allen says.

Then, in 1999, Allen was still managing investments when the family unexpectedly sold Allen Canning to his dad's brother, Rick Allen. It was time, David Allen says.

“I wouldn't have been able to get in the movie business if we hadn't sold.”

Later that year, Allen was surfing a film networking website, [indiewire.com](http://indiewire.com), and met a man seeking finan-

cial backing for a short film.

“Many times, a short film is like a calling card to take to a studio,” Allen explains.

*Last Request*, filmed in the desert north of Los Angeles, starred Michael Chiklis, known for his role as a corrupt cop on the FX cable television hit *The Shield*. The 17-minute black-and-white film was about a hit man who makes his victim dig his own grave. Allen was executive producer; he worked alongside the director and re-crafted the script's ending. *Last Request* showed at 13 film festivals and made the top 10 short list for an Academy Award in 2000.

“Nobody expects to make it with a short film. We sold it to HBO and I got half my investment back,” Allen says.

### SUCCESS AND REGRET

By 2003, Allen was spending a lot of time in a Los Angeles apartment. He bought intellectual property — scripts, hard assets and the rights to movies not yet made — including a favorite childhood science fiction book called *Hunters*. He produced a film titled *Stander*, about a South African cop turned bank robber — and *No Good Deed*, a crime drama with Jackson, Jovovich and Stellan Skarsgard. He was gearing up for *Neo Ned* with Union, Jeremy Renner and Sally Kirkland.

He showed up on the movie sets early in the morning and filmed until dark. Lights and sound systems were set up, actors went through makeup and Allen rode herd on the budget. His movies

were filmed mostly in Southern California but also in Luxembourg, on a Zia American Indian pueblo outside of Albuquerque, N.M., and in Johannesburg, South Africa.

“I've never worked so hard in my life,” he says.

Within the next two years, Allen made *Death Valley*, *Asylum*, *Cemetery Gates* and a personal favorite, *Boo* — a spooky flick filmed in an abandoned Southern California hospital. Simultaneously, he served on the Siloam Springs Board of Directors back home. But because he was in Hollywood at least 80 percent of the time, he decided not to pursue a third term.

His wife and children occasionally flew to Los Angeles, and he made it home when possible. But his relationship with Stephanie became strained, and Emmy went through first and second grade with her dad often absent.

Allen has a few filmmaking regrets. At one point, he was offered *Napoleon Dynamite* and turned it down. He produced too many movies at once, hindering his ability to market and distribute them. He passed on a successful British zombie comedy, *Shaun of the Dead*.

A producer hunts good stories, develops them, hires directors and actors, oversees filming and production, and helps edit, market and find an audience. A good title, a succinct tag line and an excellent trailer sell a movie today, Allen says. To market his movie *Dog Soldiers*, Allen

used “Six soldiers. Full moon. No chance.”

Then one day, he took a long look at himself in the mirror and decided his family needed him more than Hollywood.

“I'd already accomplished my dream, which was to make a movie. Going further into the business was stressing me and keeping me away from family.”

He came home to the hard work of repairing his marriage. Stephanie and Emmy had moved out of their home. They spent a year healing.

“Stephanie is my best friend. I wasn't about to give up,” he says. He also underwent two back surgeries that year, which was 2006. The couple recently celebrated their 28th anniversary.

### NEXT BIG STEP

In 2008, Allen was elected mayor with six votes more than state Rep. Mike Kenney, also a former city director. Allen now earns \$10,000 a year for the part-time job, which is somewhat ceremonial, as Siloam Springs is run by a city administrator. He conducts the city's board meetings, signs contracts and has veto power.

“I'm not always a person who goes with the flow,” he says. “I don't go along to get along. I have a strong sense of right and wrong and am very cognizant of what I think is best for the city.”

Former City Administrator Mark Latham remembers Allen as having great ideas while on the board and being “somewhat of a visionary. I

see him as good for the community as well as having leadership,” Latham says. “He is someone who wants to make sure he gets his opinion out there.”

Friend Mark Long went to high school and college with Allen and served with him on the city board.

“David has a tremendous passion for detail, and whatever topic he's on, he owns it. He becomes the decision. People wonder why he's making a big deal over something. He just doesn't want his decision to be wrong,” Long says.

“He's misunderstood because he always says what he thinks,” Stephanie Allen says. The movie business strained him physically, and the mayor's job is an emotional drain.

“He worries. He doesn't like to make people unhappy,” she says.

David Allen helped found Sager Creek Arts Center in 1984. He also likes to support local filmmakers just getting their start and was instrumental in starting the Little Rock Film Festival. He serves on its advisory board, and in 2008 was able to meet Charles Pierce at the festival. Pierce died in March.

“I still have a goal of directing a film. I've bet on other people but I've never bet on myself. That is down the road for me, most certainly it's my next big step.”

*Robin Mero is a former reporter for The Morning News of Northwest Arkansas and the Northwest Arkansas Times.*

brough says.

New Jersey-based [autographstore.com](http://autographstore.com) provided several entertainment relat-

and two airline tickets to get there. On that, the foundation made \$4,300, and it didn't cost a dime.

and could be going back. If Womack beats Democrat David Whitaker, Walker says he will be Womack's chief of

company execs, other Leaders issue nominees and past award winners.

This is the first time

Boyce and the late George Billingsley.

Notables such as the late