

The robotic magic of David Colman '57

"Good speaker."

"Good natured."

"Sociable and cooperative."

"Earnest student."

"Thoughtfulness at all times."

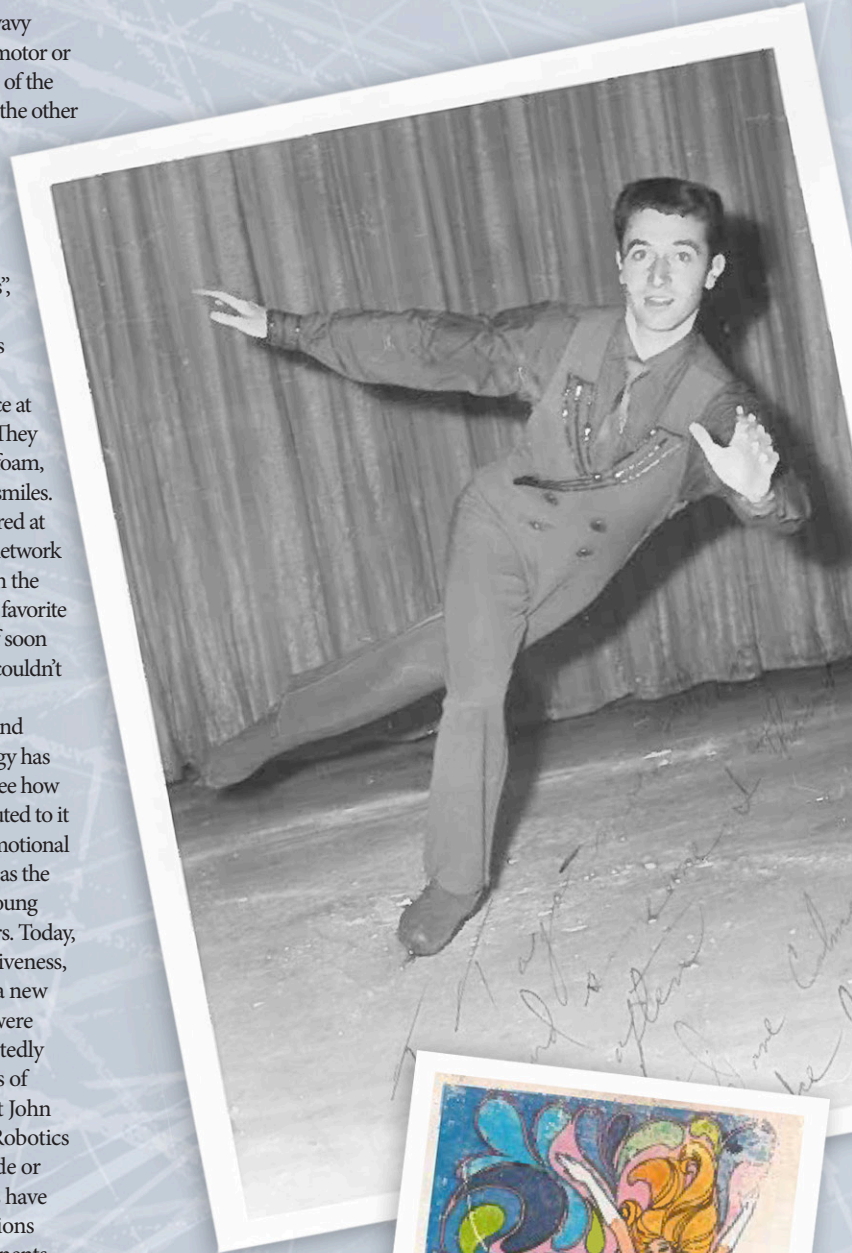
These were terms used to describe the late David Colman in his 1957 John Bapst yearbook. The second of three siblings who attended John Bapst, it is no surprise that David's older brother Ron '56 and sister Sally '64 could be described as inspirational, selfless, and generous. Ron and Sally are proudly honoring their brother's memory by securing the acquisition of a new building at 234 French Street that will serve as the school's new technology center. While Ron and Sally lost their brother in 1995, they always knew that they wanted a special way to pass on their brother's love for innovation, creativity, and challenging himself. David Colman was certainly a man ahead of his times, a true visionary.



David started his career as a professional skater with the Ice Capades and the Ice Follies. Later, he formed a business, The Robot Factory, in Cascade, Colorado. He may have been far from his hometown of Brewer, Maine but ingenuity and innovation followed him throughout his adult life. His first creation, Commander Robot I, was an ice-skating robot made of aluminum and plexiglass. Commander's main mission was to skate swiftly across the ice while performing acrobatic stunts to entertain those at the show. Audiences were delighted. Engineered by David, two motors drove Commander, whose

operator steered him along a wavy trajectory by speeding up one motor or slowing down the other. If one of the motors is running in forward, the other in reverse, the robot spins in tight circles. David's later creations included a whole family of ice-skating robots: creeping worms, pesky bugs, and warm "fuzzies", each with its own playful personality. Commander I was nearly 8 feet tall, but David's "worms" skittered across the ice at a height of only 3 or 4 inches. They were made of green urethane foam, with cute faces dominated by smiles. David and his creations appeared at national conventions and on network television, he even appeared on the Merv Griffin show. One of his favorite robots was stolen, but the thief soon brought it back. Evidently, he couldn't figure out how it worked!

Fast forward to present day and how far modern day technology has come and it is not difficult to see how a visionary like David contributed to it - the fun antics of David's promotional robots delighted millions, and as the years passed, inspired many young robot fans and aspiring creators. Today, Colman's sense of fun, inventiveness, and desire to entertain takes a new path at John Bapst. If David were here today, he would undoubtedly be impressed with the success of the technology department at John Bapst, and in particular, the Robotics Program. Over the past decade or so the school's robotics teams have traveled to national competitions and ranked highly with opponents from all over the world. The new technology center, which will house a maker space, classroom space, and a museum featuring some of David's robots, is a fitting tribute to a man who was ahead of his time - a true artist, innovator, and visionary.



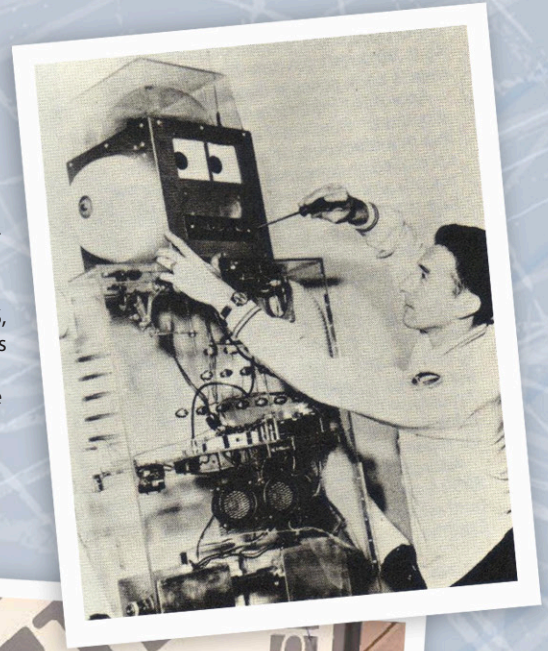
David drew inspiration for his radio-controlled robot while fixing props backstage for the Ice Follies where he once skated.



Colman once told producers of Ice Follies, "I'm going to build a robot." And during auditions he introduced Ralph Roger Robot. But, Colman said, "I didn't know what to make him say." That soon ended. Ralph was always full of patter, whether on the Johnny Carson, Steve Allen, or Merv Griffin shows, or promoting a famous hamburger chain or an airline.

Source: "Show Robots"; Bangor Daily News; cyberneticzoo.com; The Bapstonian, 1957; personal collection

David credits his work with the Universal and Nike Ajax missile systems while in the Army, along with his National Cash Register work, with giving him his mechanical know-how. Work in NBC, CBS, and ABC special effects departments helped too. "They'd call for the craziest things. The designer would draw, I'd build."



David built over 30 robots. Some are like beach balls, some like animals. Some are like R2D2 of Star Wars, although Colman's were radio-controlled while Star Wars robots had people in them.

He travelled to trade shows where he marketed Harry on his trike or his jazzy piano playing brother and some of his friends. Kids loved them.