

= Kevin Clash =

Kevin Jeffrey Clash ( born September 17 , 1960 ) is an American puppeteer whose characters include Elmo , Clifford , Benny Rabbit , and Hoots the Owl .

Clash developed an interest in puppetry at an early age , and began performing for local TV children 's shows in his hometown of Baltimore , Maryland , as a teenager . In the early 1980s , he began working in Captain Kangaroo , and began performing in Sesame Street in 1984 . He was the fifth puppeteer to perform Elmo , the character he became the most famous for , and became an executive producer and director for the show . Clash worked in various productions for the Muppets and Jim Henson Productions and in other projects . He resigned from Sesame Street in late 2012 , after allegations of sexual impropriety , which he denied and were dismissed due to statute of limitations expiring . Clash wrote an autobiography , My Life as a Furry Red Monster , which was published in 2006 , and also featured in the 2011 documentary Being Elmo : A Puppeteer 's Journey .

= = Early years = =

Kevin Clash was born in Baltimore , Maryland , on September 17 , 1960 , the third of four children born to George Clash , a flash welder and handyman , and Gladys Clash , who ran a small daycare center in their two @-@ bedroom , one @-@ bath home in the Turner Station of Dundalk , Maryland . Clash developed an interest in puppetry at an early age , inspired by children 's shows like Kukla , Fran and Ollie and Sesame Street . He made his first puppet , a version of Mickey Mouse , at the age of 10 . When he was twelve , he created a monkey puppet out of the lining of his father 's coat . His first performances were for his mother 's daycare children .

By the time he was a teenager , he had built almost 90 puppets , which he based upon commercials , popular music , and his friends . While still in high school , Clash performed at venues throughout Baltimore , including schools , churches , fundraisers , and community events . While appearing at a neighborhood festival , Clash was discovered by Baltimore television personality Stu Kerr , who became Clash 's first mentor and hired him to perform in the children 's show Caboose at Channel 2 . Clash also built puppets for the Romper Room franchise . When he was 17 , he contacted and met puppeteer Kermit Love , who became Clash 's mentor , after seeing Love featured in an episode of the documentary Call It Macaroni . In 1979 , on Love 's recommendation , Clash appeared as Cookie Monster in the Sesame Street float during the Macy 's Thanksgiving Parade , and met Jim Henson , who later became his boss , mentor , and friend .

When he was nineteen , Clash became a puppeteer for Captain Kangaroo , initially as a guest performer , in which he also made occasional on @-@ camera appearances . The producers of Captain Kangaroo used some of Clash 's puppet creations for the show . In 1984 , Clash had to turn down Henson 's offer to work on his film The Dark Crystal because he was working on two TV shows at the same time , Captain Kangaroo and Love 's syndicated program The Great Space Coaster , in which he was producer for the first time .

= = Career = =

Captain Kangaroo was cancelled in 1984 after 29 seasons , and Great Space Coaster ended , freeing up Clash to work on projects with Henson such as the film Labyrinth and Sesame Street . Clash started working at Sesame Street for ten episodes in 1983 , mostly performing nondescript , stand @-@ in puppets known as Anything Muppets . Some of his earliest characters included the saxophone @-@ playing Hoots the Owl ( based on Louis Armstrong ) , the infant Baby Natasha , and inventor Dr. Nobel Price . After 1985 , Elmo , a furry red monster , became his main character . Four puppeteers , including Richard Hunt , had performed Elmo previously , but it was Clash 's development , with a falsetto voice , that established the character . He based Elmo 's character on the preschool children that attended his mother 's daycare in Baltimore and upon his own personality and the personality of his parents . Clash followed the advice of fellow puppeteer Frank

Oz , who told Clash to always " find one special hook " for each character . Clash decided that the central characteristic for Elmo should be that he " should represent love " .

After the height of Elmo 's popularity , especially the " Tickle Me Elmo " craze in 1996 , Clash 's responsibilities at Sesame Street increased . He recruited , auditioned , and trained its puppeteers , and became the senior Muppet coordinator , a writer , director , and co @-@ producer of the " Elmo 's World " segment of the show . Clash worked with and mentored the puppeteers of Sesame Street 's international co @-@ productions . He found working with the co @-@ productions " a lot of fun " and " very rewarding " . He worked on the 1985 feature film Follow That Bird . In 2007 , he was promoted to senior creative adviser for the Sesame Workshop . Until 2011 , he was the sole performer as Elmo in all his public relations appearances , making his schedule , as he called it , " crazy " . Cheryl Henson , president of the Jim Henson Foundation , called him " essential " to the show .

Clash worked on the first film version of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles , which was dedicated to Henson , in 1990 , voicing Master Splinter . He performed in several productions with Jim Henson Productions , including as the Muppet Clifford in The Jim Henson Hour ( 1989 ) , and performing the puppetry for Frank Oz 's characters ( Miss Piggy , Fozzie Bear , Sam the Eagle , and Animal ) in Muppet Treasure Island ( 1996 ) . Clash performed in the films Muppets from Space ( 1999 ) and The Muppets ' Wizard of Oz ( 2005 ) , and the TV series Muppets Tonight ( 1996 ? 1998 ) , in which he reprised Clifford , who served as the show 's host . He performed characters and worked behind the scenes on the sitcom Dinosaurs . In 1999 , Clash worked on a film starring Elmo , The Adventures of Elmo in Grouchland .

In 2006 , Clash published his autobiography , co @-@ written by Gary Brozek and Louis Henry Mitchell , entitled My Life as a Furry Red Monster : What Being Elmo Has Taught Me About Life , Love and Laughing Out Loud . His life was featured in the 2011 documentary Being Elmo : A Puppeteer 's Journey .

= = = Resignation from Sesame Workshop = = =

In November 2012 , 23 @-@ year @-@ old Sheldon Stephens alleged that he had been in a sexual relationship with Clash which began when Stephens was 16 . Sesame Workshop had initially been presented with the allegation in June , and its investigation found the allegation to be unsubstantiated . Clash acknowledged that he had been in a relationship with the accuser ; however , he characterized the relationship as being between consenting adults . Stephens later recanted his accusation , but two weeks later , another accuser , Cecil Singleton , made similar accusations and lawsuits were filed by attorney Jeffrey Herman against Clash .

Clash resigned from Sesame Workshop on November 20 , 2012 , and released a statement saying , " Personal matters have diverted attention away from the important work ' Sesame Street ' is doing and I cannot allow it to go on any longer . I am deeply sorry to be leaving and am looking forward to resolving these personal matters privately . " Sesame Workshop also released a statement : " Unfortunately , the controversy surrounding Kevin 's personal life has become a distraction that none of us want , and he has concluded that he can no longer be effective in his job and has resigned from ' Sesame Street . ' " They stated that other puppeteers had been trained to serve as Clash 's understudy and would take over his roles on the show .

In July 2013 , the three cases against Clash were dismissed because the claims were made more than six years after each man reasonably should have become aware of Clash 's alleged violations during the three years after each turned 21 . Clash 's lawyers expressed his hope that the ruling would allow him to restore his personal and professional life . Lawyers for the plaintiffs appealed the ruling , alleging that the psychological effects of the abuse weren 't fully realized until 2012 . In April 2014 , the decision to dismiss the three lawsuits was upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals . Months after the other alleged victims made legal accusations , Stephens filed a lawsuit in Pennsylvania against Clash , but the case ultimately was dismissed in June 2014 because the statute of limitations had ended .

= = Personal life = =

Clash was married for 17 years , and has a daughter who was born in 1993 .

In November 2012 , Clash came out publicly as gay in response to the allegations that led to his resignation from the Sesame Workshop , stating , " I am a gay man . I have never been ashamed of this or tried to hide it , but felt it was a personal and private matter . "

Clash is African American and has stated that although children ignore him and speak directly to Elmo , African @-@ American adults tend to be surprised when they meet him . He has stated in interviews that his racial identity was pertinent to his work , and that it came through in his performances .

= = Awards and honors = =

Clash won Daytime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Performer in a Children 's Series for his work as Elmo on Sesame Street in 1990 , 2005 ? 2007 and 2009 ? 2013 . In all , he has won 27 daytime Emmys and one prime @-@ time Emmy .

He was the first recipient of the ' Miss Jean ' Worthley Award for Service to Families and Children given by Maryland Public Television on June 9 , 2007 .

On May 19 , 2012 , Clash was presented with an honorary degree from Washington & Jefferson College .