



In Her Own Words: Traci Paige Johnson Co-creator of a Preschool Phenomenon

By Jake Friedman

In his bestseller, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell discusses the “stickiness factor” that certain cultural trends have to maintain mass appeal and recognition. He also writes, “Blue’s Clues’ may be one of the stickiest television show ever made.”

Traci Paige Johnson didn’t spare a detail when describing to me her venture into this show, one that helped maintain New York’s place on the TV animation map. So I’ll step back, and let the co-creator do the talking.

How has the process been for you to get where you are today?

“I always knew I wanted to do children’s television so I made it a focus since freshman year majoring in television/film and minoring in child development. Animation was more of a side hobby and I concentrated on creating, directing and producing live-action in addition to animation ... all focuses on kids’ TV. I wanted to learn all sides of production. It’s important to have an idea and know how to execute it from beginning to end. There are a lot of artists out there and a lot of producers out there but if you can be both artistic/creative AND budget/time-management conscious, you’re golden.

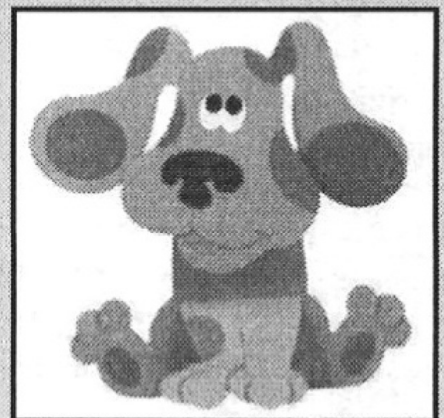
“Once out of College, I’d just take any PA job in children’s TV and learn as much as I could. The smaller the show, the better, because there was more opportunity to grow and take on more. Do your job, do it well, no complaining, and just soak up everything. If you’ve learned everything you could and there’s no growth, move on. I always kept an idea book of stories, inspirations and designs of my own, waiting for the right opportunity (luck favors the prepared mind).

“I loved animation, but only doing my own ideas and visions”

“I freelanced for four years out of college starting as a PA, moving to AP, Producer, etc, while creating animations on the side. Sometimes I’d do them for the shows I was working on and other times it was just to keep my mind fresh. Then when I was twenty-five the opportunity came ... I think it was my creative style in conjunction with being a Producer that ultimately landed me the job.”

What was the pitch process like for you?

“Blue’s Clues’ wasn’t a traditional pitch process. It was Nickelodeon’s impetus to create a show, not the other way around. I’d been freelancing with Big Nickelodeon, working with kids to animate their stories for air, when I heard Nick Jr. was looking for a Producer to be a creator of a new “game show” or “play along series” for preschoolers. It was basically a pitch of myself and why I’d be the best candidate. I met with Nick Jr. Vice Prez] Brown Johnson and my two current co-creators, Angela Santomero and Todd Kessler, who were on board. I was only 25 but had a lot of production and animation experience under my belt and an updated reel of all my cut-out animations. I had created, produced and directed before, but certainly not to the extent of an entire series.



Blue in Greyscale

"It was a wonderful interview and when I met my co-creators everything clicked. We had so many similar ideas and visions. They were inspired by my simple graphic style and kid aesthetic. When I left the interview, I was pumped!!! I went home and wrote out ten pages of ideas, my brain was bursting with so many inspirations. I sent it in along with my thank-you note (thank-you note being key) and waited at home knowing this would be the perfect job for me.

Needless to say, I got it. I knew Viacom liked young talent because it was cheap, but where else would I, at 25-years-old, get to be on a creative team of a new series? It was pure gold. I had gone to heaven.

What kind of obstacles arose in your career?

"Unemployment. Being a freelancer has so many pros --- you meet a LOT of inspiring people, you get a LOT of different experiences and jobs, and, I think, it's easier to make upward jumps in title. The downside [is that] you have to always be thinking of the next gig and sometimes there can be more downtime than you'd like. The funniest thing is that a few months before I got the job at Nick, I was in my worst unemployment funk ever. It was going on five months ... Ultimately, I conquered the uneasiness of unemployment by:

- momentum; waking up and getting dressed (... not spending the day in your PJs)...
- volunteering; I knew I wanted to do children's stuff so I volunteered at children's museums and kids' art workshops to know my audience.
- Networking; I hate that superficial feeling; for me it was about listening to people's stories and hearing their journeys of how they got to where they are. ... I always left informational interviews with more names of people to contact.
- Correspondence; [I] always sent hand-written thank-you notes and sent little notes during the holidays just to check in.
- [Taking] comfort in clichés: It's feast or famine, it's always darkest before the dawn, be grateful for the good periods and graceful in the bad.
- Idea bank; [I] used the downtime to come up with ideas and feed my head with inspirations from movies, museums, life, etc."

What kind of person should pursue the path that you did?

"I loved animation, but only doing my own ideas and visions. I consider myself a folk artist, not a traditional animator or illustrator, so I couldn't imagine getting a traditional job in animation; I wouldn't have that talent. Yes, I created my own animation style that served me well, but I knew my talent wasn't in drawing, it was more of an overall creative director approach. Doing 'Blue's Clues,' I felt like Frank Zappa (was it him?) who said, 'I could've never made the cut for my own band.'

What plans lie ahead for you?

"After spending the last ten years educating millions of preschoolers, I'm loving concentrating directly on my two. I always knew I wanted to be a mom, so I'm taking this job very seriously --- and loving it.

Jake Friedman is a New York-based animator. Look for him in this month's "Animation Magazine" or visit him at www.jakefriedman.net.