



*Sunny day
Sweepin' the clouds away,
On my way
To where the air is sweet.
Can you tell me how to get,
How to get to Sesame Street?*

—*Sesame Street Theme Song*

A pillar of preschool culture, Sesame Street celebrates 25 years of entertaining and educating children.

by Nicole Nolan

By all accounts, I was a *Sesame Street* addict in my early years. I don't remember actually watching the program, but in retrospect, I can trace several hallmarks of my childhood back to the *Sesame* influence. My invisible friend, Bob (who I blamed for telling me to toss my mother's wedding rings into the back yard) was derived from the popular *Sesame Street* adult host. And my favorite muppet of all time was Snuffleupagus, Big Bird's shy woolly mammoth friend. My own stuffed Snuffleupagus once suffered several invasive examinations at the hands of over-zealous customs inspectors, who insisted on checking behind his hollow, plastic eyes for drugs and other valuables. These indignities, which resulted in the amputation of one furry eyebrow, did not deter my love for Snuffy. Today, he occupies a place of honor on a shelf in my mother's basement.

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I feel proud to have been among the first preschoolers nurtured on the *Sesame Street* education-via-entertainment ethic. The educational benefits of the show on myself are hard to measure, although I do know my numbers and letters exceptionally well. Much as I adored *Sesame Street*, though, as an upper-middle class white Canadian kid, I was not a member of the audience *Sesame Street* creators



The late Mr. Hooper, and the incomparable Ernie and Bert. [CTW/Richard Termine]

envisioned when they first came up with the idea for the show.

Origins of a childhood legend

It all started in America in the late 1960s. At that time, researchers were publishing studies showing that the performance of poor, inner city children in the early years of grade school compared unfavorably with that of their middle-class suburban counterparts. Educators maintained that their poor performance was due to the fact that inner city kids received less preschool instruction in the home than suburbanites. Enter the Carnegie Foundation, a charitable institution interested in the education and development of young children, particularly of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since they knew that many kids watched TV, Carnegie commissioned public TV producer Joan Ganz Cooney to do a study assessing the viability of using television to ease the transition from home to school for inner city children.

With this mandate, Cooney entered into the world of preschool America and found its young inhabitants happily

singing beer commercial jingles. She returned to the Carnegie folks with a revolutionary idea: use a blatantly commercial technique for non-commercial purposes. Pre-school children, Cooney said, reacted well to the fast-paced, thirty second slots of television advertising; in fact, they were able to learn from it. Previously, educational TV had lost out because it lacked the pizzazz and sparkle of commercial endeavors. If public television wanted to capture young viewers, Cooney maintained, it would have to have many of the production values of commercial TV—pace, humor, professional performing talent and animation, to name a few. Her vision was a funny, entertaining show interrupted by “commercials” that would teach children their letters and numbers.

Thus, *Sesame Street* was born. Funded by government grants and donations from foundations like Carnegie, Sesame was aired on public television in 1969. Because they were primarily interested in reaching inner city kids, *Sesame Street* creators set the show on a street reminiscent of an inner city neighborhood. Adult hosts were chosen to represent all of America, but there was a definite emphasis on having strong black and Hispanic role models like Gordon and Maria.

In an attempt to ensure that the program reached kids in low-income neighborhoods, and to make sure the educational aims of the program were

picked up and supported in these communities, the New York-based Children's Television Workshop created a department of Community Educational Services. To make sure this educational experience was a success, during the summer before *Sesame Street* went on the air, this new department enlisted 7,500 youths in 30 urban locations into a Neighborhood Youth Corps. The volunteers were trained to view the program along with preschoolers and to then provide them with activities that reinforced *Sesame Street's* educational message.

Rising Above Sesame's Foundations

Fueled by the antics of Jim Henson's muppets, and entertaining, fast-paced segments, the show's popularity went far beyond the inner city kids it aimed to help. *Sesame Street* has become the most



The original Sesame Street gang, back when it all began. [CTW/Richard Termine]

popular program in TV history, capturing 51 Emmy awards during its lifetime. As it began its 25th season this past November, *Sesame Street's* yearly revenue from its magazine for parents and children exceeded \$40 million and product licensing fees accounted for \$28 million. The show that began completely dependent on public funding now relies on grants for only 10-20 percent of its budget.

But money has never been the central issue for the Children's Television Workshop, which only reluctantly began granting product licensing when it realized that public money was running low. After years of complaints by public health authorities and Parent-Teacher Associations that children's programming is of low quality, full of violence and often designed to sell brands of toys and food to children who watch them, *Sesame Street* remains one of the few examples of what television can do for children when their interests—rather than those of advertisers—are first on the agenda.

Low income kids, long at the bottom of commercial television's list of priorities, still figure prominently in the *Sesame Street* audience. Studies in the



The Squirrelles, Sesame's new creation: a 'Motown' singing sensation. [CTW/Richard Termine]

late 1980s showed *Sesame Street* had a 93 to 99 percent penetration rate in inner city neighborhoods. And, unlike other kid's shows, Children's Television Workshop keeps a notoriously tight leash on its licensed products. In an attempt to make sure that marketing is aimed at parents, not children, the company stipulates that *Sesame Street* products cannot be advertised on TV shows whose audience is more than 10 percent preschoolers and that *Sesame* characters cannot be used in commercials to sell the products.

The best-researched show on television, *Sesame Street* episodes go through rigorous screenings with a panel of educators and are tested on preschool audiences before being aired. Recently, a show on divorce starring Snuffleupagus

mercials, *Sesame Street* has done more harm than good. Such arguments assert that conditioning children to accept information in 30-second bits can have negative psychological and intellectual consequences when children are asked to learn for more prolonged time periods.

Women's groups criticized the show in its first season when Gordon's stay-at-home wife Susan was featured singing songs like "I flip when a fella sends me flowers, I drool over dresses made of lace." In the second season, Susan got a nursing job, but criticism of the roles played by female *Sesame Street* characters continues today. Feminist Ellen Goodman wrote, "The females that do live on *Sesame Street* can be divided into three groups; teacher, simp and mother

tural differences which rendered some of its popular U.S. characters incomprehensible. In Latin America (home to few canaries) Plaza *Sesame* has replaced Big Bird with a seven-foot parrot named Montoya; Oscar the Grouch has been rechristened Bodoque. In Arabic countries, Big Bird is a camel, and in Germany, a bear. Israeli children watch a porcupine named Kippy and a grouch named Moishe Oofnick. During the Gulf War, Kippy was used by the Israeli government to show children how to put on a gas mask.

In Canada, one of the first countries to pick up *Sesame Street*, the show is going into its twenty-second season. In its early years, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) simply re-broadcast the American program, replacing Spanish content with French language segments. Since then, Canadian content has gone from five minutes to 22. The CBC now produces its own segments and has introduced Canadian-inspired muppets such as a bear, an otter, a woman bush pilot named Dodi, and a reporter named Barbara Plum (after the late respected Canadian news personality Barbara Frum). Sensitive to the need to represent an adequate cross-section of people, *Sesame Street* now features wheelchair-bound characters: in Canada, a puppet named Katie, and in the U.S., a little girl named Tarah.

To another successful quarter-century

Recently, I was having a quiet dinner in a Toronto restaurant with my mother when a hoard of preschool children descended upon us. It so happened that a stage version of *Sesame Street* was playing across the street. Glassy-eyed with the kind of manic excitement induced by a plethora of sugary treats, the kids jumped all over the restaurant bellowing *Sesame Street* songs and waving multicolored *Sesame Street* flags. If I had been able to collect my thoughts amidst the mayhem, I quite probably would have proposed a toast to many more years for a children's show that aims to—and is able to—teach so much and still inspire such revelry.

The dining experience was less than pleasant, but one thing was certain: after 25 years of broadcasting, *Sesame Street* still reigns supreme in the hearts of the under-five crowd. ●



Sesame's Canadian cousins (from left to right): Basil, Louis, Dodi, Katie, Michael and Garth Burmegie. [CBC/Fred Phipps]

and his parents was yanked by producers after questions revealed that children in the test audience believed an argument could lead to divorce and that Snuffy's parents might not love him anymore.

Problems on the Street

During its twenty-five years on television, *Sesame Street* has garnered its share of criticism. Some educators (like Dorothy Singer, co-director at Yale University's Family Television Research Center) say the show is too fast paced and disjointed for young viewers. Other educators maintain that by adopting the form of TV com-

(which more often than not is a combination of teacher and simp). And oh, yes, a cow." This past season, *Sesame* producers attempted to even out the gender imbalance by introducing seven new female muppets—among them "The Squirrelles", a trio of female squirrels who live in the park and sing Motown music reminiscent of the Supremes, and Zoe, a three-year-old girl monster.

Big Bird the Camel and a Grouch Named Moishe

Having aired in 90 countries in its 25 years, *Sesame Street* has adapted to cul-