

Behind the Scenes of “Sesame Street”

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Point Loma Resident Shares Her Secrets

By Patty Ducey-Brooks

It's always gratifying to learn of people who reside in San Diego who have had exceptional careers and have the talent and skillset to share their life adventures and knowledge. Dr. Lucille Burbank, who is an author, educational media consultant, mother, and grandmother, worked behind the scenes of “Sesame Street” in their research division. One of her main tasks was to meet with the head writer to make important changes in the scripts before production began.

That is impressive, especially when you consider the success and history of “Sesame Street.” Fortunately, she has done her part to make sure her experiences with this effort are shared with us. Here are the results of a Q&A session with Dr. Burbank:

Q. What was the inspiration for writing this book?

A. While I was a consultant at Sesame Street, I was also working on my doctorate in educational media. This entailed conducting in-depth interviews with the creators (pioneers) of this show, such as Joan Cooney, responsible for the creation of “Sesame Street,” Caroll Spinney, puppeteer of Big Bird, Producer Jon Stone, called “the soul of Sesame Street,” Jane Henson, wife and creative partner of the late Jim Henson, and Jeff Moss, known for his popular song, “Rubber Duckie,” to name a few. After completing my doctoral degree, I discovered that most of the pioneers had passed away, and they had given me such rich information that it was imperative I write a book based on their interviews. A couple of years later, “Secrets from Sesame Street’s Pioneers: How They Produced a Successful Television Series” was published. Later, a second edition of this book was released, titled simply, “The Inside Secrets of Sesame Street.”

Q. Looking back in light of the 50th anniversary, what was it like to work in such a fun and creative environment with the writers/producers of “Sesame Street”?

A. In one word, “Heavenly!” While consulting at the Sesame Workshop, creators of “Sesame Street,” I was surrounded by people who loved their work as much as I did, and their creativity was boundless. In other words, my experience there was “icing on the cake” on my career in educational media.

Q. You worked in the research department of the show's production. What did that entail exactly?

A. It entailed using computerized analysis to study the attention and comprehension of selected "Sesame Street" segments. In addition, I introduced and implemented a new research paradigm that was more appropriate for other studies. There was also the important activity of applying the research findings and therefore, I had frequent meetings with the head writer. Last but not least, because I was a consultant, it was my responsibility to see what was needed. When I first started working in Sesame's research division, the reports of studies were written up in a newsletter format. While that was fine for some studies, it was not for other more comprehensive ones such as on fire safety and child abuse. Thus, I established a higher standard for reporting studies by producing, "An Empirical Study of Fire Safety Messages on Sesame Street."

Q. Because "Sesame Street" was educational, did you have to follow certain guidelines? How did the writers decide what age range to target?

A. Yes, guidelines were always followed such as, an action that should be taken in a particular circumstance. An example: The writers were doing a series on cooperation, and the segments they were writing always had to end with a comic payoff. Meaning that whatever happened the action at the end always had to fall apart, having not succeeded, and thus be funny. The researchers, however, disagreed and explained that if the characters don't succeed, then you're showing that cooperation doesn't pay off. And we want you to show not only what cooperation is, but that it does pay off. So, the scripts were completely changed.

Q. In our current culture, do you see a significant need in teaching kids (how to use) about electronic media?

A. Definitely yes. While working at "Sesame Street," I learned a lot of lessons, and one is the fact that children learn much better when they are having fun and when they feel safe. In that spirit, my team has produced a booklet that gives 52 tips on how to keep your child safe with television and electronic media.

Q. Why do you think the show has achieved such success and longevity?

A. Mainly, because of the people: You can produce a TV series with less money and less time, but you can't do it with bad people. You must have good people who love their work and believe in the contribution they are making. In addition, a sign of good people for a children's show are those that working for children is their highest goal itself. In other words, you don't go from working for children to growing up to working for adults. Working for children is the mature work in itself.

Q. Working on the production of "Sesame Street," did you have a favorite character?

A. Yes, I did; it was Big Bird! I was able to interview Carroll Spinney, who was the puppeteer for Big Bird during the show's 50 years on the air. He just recently retired.

Knowing that this is only a brief glimpse at what Dr. Burbank learned and experienced, I know I plan to purchase and read her books. She also reminded me that for those of us who enjoy watching past segments of "Sesame Street," they are available on HBO and PBS.

Here's a little additional history on Dr. Burbank. She is the recipient of a doctoral degree from Temple University, and has worked in educational media and technology towards the advancement of education and special education. Receiving a scholarship while earning her doctorate, allowed her to conduct a much larger dissertational study on three prominent children's television shows: "Captain Kangaroo," "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" and "Sesame Street." Dr. Burbank has also written a booklet of tips titled, "52 Tips For Parents: Guide Your Child to Safe TV and Electronic Media." For more information, visit www.TeachingKidsToLove.com





Dr. Lucille Burbank, a resident of Point Loma, is an author, educational media consultant, mother, and grandmother.

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